

Fallout **EQUESTRIA**

By Kkat

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VOLUME TWO:
VOICES OF THE PAST

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



VOICES OF THE PAST

"It is a ghost story. They're all made up."

Home.

"Relinquish your rights to the contents of the vault, and she's all yours," Gawd explained as she pointed a wing at Junction R-7. "Do you accept?"

A vault full of memories torn from the minds of ponies two hundred years dead... or a place to call my home.

"Won't you need it?" I asked cautiously. "For defense?"

"Now that I'm running the show, I'll be moving into Shattered Hoof proper. We don't have the numbers to effectively spread between all the outposts anymore. We have t' consolidate and build up new defenses. If we're lucky, Red Eye's slavers will scurry back t' their dens and lick their wounds. I don't trust in luck." Gawd gave a hard smile. "I prefer t' count on people being greedy. Tends t' work much better."

I nodded slowly. "And the ponies here, they won't loot it while I'm away?"

Gawd smirked. I was getting good at asking what she seemed to consider the right questions. "Not if I tell them not t', they won't." With an uncharacteristic touch of warmth, she added, "Everyone acknowledges what you did for them back there. Those that don't feel like they owe you at least have the good sense not t' draw the ire of the local dragon slayer."

I looked at the disabled train and scrap metal shacks, seeing it in an entirely new light. This could be my home. Our home, if Calamity and Velvet Remedy were willing. A place to rest. For Calamity to hang his hat. (Figuratively, at least, considering he even slept with it on, just like he slept in the underbarding for that battle saddle.)

I trotted around it, drinking it in.

There was a water pump out back. Grills for cooking. A small water purifier in what had been Gawd's private quarters. As well as the passenger car, the train included several lockable cattle cars and two boxcars -- we could each have our own space, plenty of room for storage. A generator in one of the shacks kept the lights on at night and the refrigerator in the back boxcar running.

I glanced at the guard platform over what had been Gawd's office. Calamity waved his bandaged wing back at me. He was almost finished mounting the tri-barreled plasma cannon in its position. I wondered... Calamity was the only one of the three of us who had any skill shooting that monster manually, but would it be possible for me to rig it up like an automated turret? Thinking of the sky-camouflaged convoy, I knew a perfect place to get the parts.

True, the place was rusted, filthy, full of moldy hay -- but most of that could be set to rights with a lot of hard work and a little TLC. The horrible reek from the station house, its bathroom overflowing with manure, was another matter entirely. I glanced over to it, gagging slightly. That would be an arduous and entirely unpleasant task to fix.

Velvet Remedy caught my expression and sing-songed, "Don't think of it as years of piled-up ponypies, Littlepip. Think of it as free fertilizer. We could start a garden."

We! The word filled me with more warmth and joy than direct sunlight possibly could.

My home in the Equestrian Wasteland would be the former house of Gawd. Including her office.

Any hesitation (or concern about why Gawd suddenly wanted a vault full of memory orbs), was washed away by that wonderful "we".

"I'll take it!"



"Ah don't get it," Calamity muttered. "She's helpin' *raiders* now?"

Together, Calamity and I walked through the rock yard of Shattered Hoof slightly behind Gawd. Velvet Remedy was elsewhere, insisting that she do what she could to mend the injured, despite having completely run out of medical supplies (both our own and those of Shattered Hoof) the second morning after the battle. And even though it was entirely possible that the vile monsters who killed Silver Bell's parents were amongst the wounded rather than the dead.

"Won't be raiders anymore." The voice of Gawd held a finality that was hard to question.

Calamity, being Calamity, did anyway. "Don't change the horrible things that some of 'em did." He shook his mane. "Ah still don't like it."

"That was under Deadeyes." Gawdyna Grimfeathers had led the embattled ponies of Shattered Hoof to victory against Red Eye's slavers. Now, with both Deadeyes and Mister Topaz eliminated, she was the one the ponies of Shattered Hoof were turning to for leadership. "I've got big plans for this place; there won't be any room for honorless monsters in *my* Shattered Hoof."

I watched her, admiring her words and the way she moved. I didn't like Gawdyna, but I couldn't help but respect her. And yes, she was sleek and powerful and very attractive for a non-pony. (And so what if she's a griffin? There's nothing wrong with just looking.) Gawd herself

had taken on both of the enemy griffins, felling them with her magical energy shotgun and her talons. She'd picked up a few new scars in the battle. I thought they only made her look more impressive.

I hoped other mares could find them so; I was wearing a scar of my own now. Burns, however horribly painful, could be healed fully with magical remedies. But the malignant damage caused by warping and destructive magical power could not so easily be undone. The small line of corrupted flesh where the magical energy lance had touched my neck would be with me for the rest of my life.

"...will have a few rotten eggs, but they'll be dealt with." Gawdyna was speaking to Calamity. I realized my attention had drifted; I'd been admiring her flanks (in a perfectly respectful way) and lost part of the conversation. "Every other pony is realizing they've spent the last years breaking their hooves for a dragon who intended t' eat them as a reward. They're reassessing their life paths and most will be ready for a change."

Gawdyna smirked, looking at Calamity. "I'll put the fear of Gawd into any who aren't."

Over the last few days, I had learned that Mister Topaz had lowered the cargo lift and was just emerging into the rock yard when I set off that alarm. The dragon's voice was loud, and had carried all the way into the yard. While no pony had been privy to my side of the conversation, several dozen had heard everything the dragon had to say.

Word had spread amongst the survivors. Every pony knew my companions and me by name now and had formed an opinion...

"Hey Littlepip!" a shout rang across the yard from a group of ponies sorting armors stripped off the dead. "Found any good bullets of dragonslaying yet? Did you try Mister Topaz's pantry?"

...some less empowering than others. I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore them.

Focusing forward, I broke into the conversation. "What 'big plans' do you have?"

Gawd stopped and turned, looking me over appraisingly. Clearly, I'd tried to pry at secrets she preferred to keep close to her breast. After a long moment, she gave me as much of an answer as I was going to get, and nothing more than I would have learned naturally in a matter of weeks.

"In the wake of Mister Topaz's untimely splattering, we have enough gemstones to entice caravans and establish trade routes. Shattered Hoof lies within a few days' caravan travel of both Manchattan and New Appleloosa." Gawd fixed me with a knowing grin. "And I hear the Appleloosians are looking for some new trade partners."

I tried not to wince. Just how much did Gawdyna know?

"An' Ah've got a barn in Canterlot to sell ya," Calamity scoffed, giving Gawd a wry smile. "If ya expect me t' believe a hardened mercenary like Gawdyna Grimfeathers is lookin' t' settle down an' play mayor."

Gawd laughed. It was a rich and seasoned laugh. "Yer right. I'm also sending out..." She paused, finding the right word. "Invitations to Talons not currently under contract."

She didn't elaborate further, but I was beginning to get the picture.

"And the memory orbs?" I asked, mostly out of curiosity.

As pleased as I was with the way Junction R-7 was shaping up (especially now that we had sealed up the vomit-inducing stink and started turning my designs for a turret array into a reality), I had begun to suspect that I had gotten the shorter end of the deal. The idea didn't upset me; I had my saddlebags full as it was. If anything, I admired how shrewd Gawdyna appeared to be.

Gawd's eyes narrowed. "None of your concern." About what I expected.

As we reached the end of the yard and stepped into the guard tower, I could hear a radio playing. The ending of an ancient song by Sapphire Shores gave way to the voice of DJ Pon3.

“Good evening wastelanders! How’s every pony doing? Got some great news for you today! Remember that little Stable Gal who took on the slavers of Appleloosa and saved all those ponies? Well don’t ask me how, but she survived takin’ a nosedive off a cliff in a speeding train. That’s right, fillies and gentlecolts: she’s back!”

Gawd had kept walking, but Calamity had stopped and was staring at me, eyebrows raised and hat tipped back. I felt myself blushing hotly and not knowing why.

“And what’s she been up to now, I hear you ask? Well, sit down an’ put on your listening ears, cuz it’s time for DJ Pon3 to tell you a story. Ready? Good. This is the story of a little filly named Silver Bell...”

I looked to Calamity in distress. I did not like getting credit for what was really Velvet Remedy’s good deed. All *I* did was push Watcher into recruiting Ditzzy Doo’s help.

“Wait ‘till he starts callin’ ya dragonslayer,” Calamity made merry at my discomfort. DJ Pon3 didn’t mention my pegasus friend at all, and Calamity seemed unduly pleased by that.

I looked back over the rock yard and the ponies hard at work in the aftermath of the battle. A slightly melancholy feeling took hold in my chest.

The end of the week, I thought. By then, I would have the turrets scavenged from the sky convoy up and running. By then, we would be fully mended and rested. My coat was growing back nicely over where it had burned off. Velvet Remedy had already stopped fussing over Calamity’s wing.

Calamity was already getting restless. He had joined me because, like him, I wasn’t content to do nothing while others were being abused and murdered. He respected the idea of Junction R-7 as a base of operations, and was already drawing up plans for a workshop in one of the cattle cars, but my pegasus friend was never going to settle down and play happy homemaker.

Velvet Remedy was still fretting over the most gravely injured whom she had been able to save, but I could tell she was beginning to accept there was nothing more she could do which other ponies were not capable of. Soon, she too would desire to leave this place. The nightingale wasn't done flying yet.

I, myself, wanted to stomp out the cruel shadow of Red Eye's slavery that darkened the soul of Equestria -- but that was a goal both vague and absurdly ambitious. I had proven I could save individuals, but I wasn't so arrogant as to believe I could actually change the course of armies and economies. In truth, the only tangible goal ahead of me was meeting with DJ Pon3. I was rather counting on him to point me the way. Plus, after listening to his radio broadcasts for the last few days, I really did fancy the idea of getting Velvet Remedy's music onto the airwaves.

By the end of the week, it would be time to go.



We were ready to go. Except, that was, for Velvet Remedy. I watched her laying on the floor of the train car she had claimed as her own, batting the memory orb we had scavenged from the wreckage of Ditzzy Doo Deliveries between her forehooves.

"You still haven't viewed that?" I asked with surprise.

Velvet Remedy looked up at me with a cutely meek stare. "After what you found in the vault? How can I? I've been hoping that it's about Fluttershy... but now." She caught it between her hooves and brought it up to her eyes. "What if it's a confession? What if it's bad?"

I could understand. I remembered my reaction upon realizing Velvet Remedy was not a prisoner of the old Appleloosa slavers. And even though that had turned out to be for laudable reasons, I knew how much it hurt to see the pony you idolize fall from the pedestal you put them on.

"Would you like me to view it first for you?" I offered.

Velvet Remedy smiled gratefully and nodded. She set the memory orb down and backed away.

I took a deep breath, swallowing back a sudden hesitation. I'd never actually viewed a memory orb before. Logically, I knew what to expect: a reliving of some other pony's experience. I'd been told such memories were visual, auditory, tactile... even taste and smell were preserved. But would it be crisp and vivid, or blurred by age? Would I see things as they had really been, or would it be filtered by the perceptions and biases of the rememberer? Would I sense the pony's thoughts? And would I be able to tell them from my own?

I felt a little weak, but also intensely curious. Velvet Remedy was watching me; her presence reminding me why I was doing this.

I knelt. Leaning forward, I touched my horn to the memory orb and focused ever so lightly.

A strange flushing sensation washed over me as the train car, Velvet Remedy and the entire Equestrian Wasteland was obliterated and replaced with an entirely different reality.



I was standing on a stage, or more precisely the pony whose eyes I was seeing through and ears I was hearing through had stood on a stage.

It was strangely like being paralyzed; I could feel what she (?) felt, but I couldn't move on my own. I suddenly had the urgent desire to bite my lower lip, a desire followed by a flash of panic when I couldn't.

I was looking out over a crowded auditorium in a large and rather nice indoor theatre. Many ponies in the crowd were engaged in conversation, and a low storm of overlapping voices filled the room. Everything was slightly muted and out of focus, but I could still make out the faces of each individual pony – a level of detail that defined this as a raw recording of the events by the brain of the pony I was, for lack of a better word, “riding” rather than what the pony could have naturally recalled on her own. I wanted to take a closer look at the

walls of the auditorium -- I had the distinct impression that they were not wood paneled but rather actually formed from growing trees, much like the Ponyville Library. But, of course, I could only watch what this pony had watched.

She concentrated on an elder (yet adorably cute) yellow pegasus with a flowing pink mane falling over much of her face, and a matching pink tail, who walked reluctantly past her towards a podium standing front and center on the stage. The yellow pony stared at the floor as she walked, as if afraid to make eye contact with the crowd before she had the podium between her and them like a shield.

I was struck by the distinct similarity between this pony and the one on the billboard I had seen a week ago, although what string of fortunes could take a pony from being the spokesmodel for carrot-flavored cola to serving as one of the most powerful mares in government was beyond me.

“um... h-hello? Can I have your attention, please? If you don't mind?”

The massive speaker system of the auditorium magnified the pony's voice, boosting it up to what nearly reached the volume of normal conversation. And yet, the crowd hushed instantly. Every buck and mare in the crowd turned their attention fully to the yellow mare with the three pink butterflies as her cutie mark. I immediately recognized the pattern. Velvet Remedy had hung the medical boxes in her Appleloosa boxcar so their butterflies would look exactly like that.

“Thank you,” the pegasus squeaked, seeming surprised at being so abruptly the focus of so much attention. It dawned on me that she didn't have the assertiveness to command their attention like this. The ponies in the crowd didn't listen out of obedience, much less fear, of the mare on the stage. No, in fact, this wasn't even respect that I was seeing. This was love.

“Now...um... I know everypony is really, really busy. So I'll try not to take too much of your time.”

I got it, but I didn't think she got it. Fluttershy was worried about offending them, or inconveniencing them. From their expressions, I doubted that was even possible.

"Princess Luna has given us... that is... she's allowed us to... We have a new project."

I heard a few nickers and neighs rippling through the crowd. No matter how much they loved the mare on the stage, this was clearly not welcome news.

The yellow pegasus eeped, cringing slightly. "Please... it's okay. I know we're all overworked, and everypony has *so* much to do already... and you're all doing just wonderful." As she added that last statement, she smiled warmly at all of them. If all the water in Stable Two had frozen, that smile could have melted it.

"But... this is really important. I've been talking with Princess Luna, and.... I really, really want to do this project. I'm behind it completely, and I really hope you will be too."

The dissenting sounds stopped. Everypony listened.

"This horrible, terrible war has gone on far, far too long and hurt so many people." I could hear the sadness and hurt in her voice. Sweet, merciful Celestia... I wanted to gallop over and give her a hug. I wanted to lie to her and tell her things would be all right. "So Luna says the Ministry of Peace should work on a way to end the war, and bring everyone, pony and zebra alike, back to the table of diplomacy."

Some pony (whom I had the distinct urge to buck in the face) actually asked, "If the war ends, won't we all be out of a job?"

I heard Fluttershy whisper the prayer, "From your lips to Celestia's ears."



I stumbled, gasping as if I had been holding my breath, as my own world burst through, flooding over me. I spent a moment steadying myself.

Velvet Remedy was looking up at me with big, beautiful eyes. I smiled to her, levitating the memory orb back to her, being careful to focus around it rather than directly at it so as not to be lost in the memory again.

“It’s *not* bad.”



We had traveled for most of a day under the slate grey skies. The cold, dead bones of Manehattan loomed ahead, still at least a day off. But even this far out, the balefire bomb’s destructive power had been felt. The flames had not reached anywhere near here, but the massive shockwave had flattened trees and caved in homes.

We approached a small, very humble home set apart from all the others, a few miles farther from Manehattan than the rest of the suburbs which had surrounded the city. The front door of the hut faced away from the city, as if the home itself felt shunned by the urban monoliths in the background. Because of this, the front door had survived entirely intact while most of the hut beyond had collapsed into itself. At this distance, damage from the bomb couldn’t have been more than that of a strong windstorm, but it had weakened the other side of the home enough for the decaying effects of age to ravage it.

As we got closer, Calamity whispered, “Somepony’s home.” He lifted off into the air, stealthily flying forward to get a better look. A moment later, he returned with a smile. “We’re good. Got ourselves a wanderin’ merchant who’s holed up in the ruin. Don’t mind the owl; Ah’m pretty sure it’s tame.”

Calamity spun on his wings and flew ahead to greet the merchant. Velvet Remedy trotted after him, moving around to the small building’s (lack of a) west side. As I followed, I noticed that somepony had nailed a recording to the front door. It looked ancient

and badly weathered; I suspected it had been there since the owner of the hut had died. I change course, trotting towards the door, and my PipBuck flashed an enigmatic notice on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, letting me know that it had decided to label this particular ruined hut “Trixie’s Cottage”. I had long since given up trying to understand why my PipBuck kept marking seemingly random locations.

The recording was in horrible shape. I pulled it down, intending to work on it while Calamity haggled with the merchant. In the back of my mind, a voice insisted that this might be hard enough to call for some Party-Time Mint-als. I knew the voice was lying, and I tried to ignore it.

As I rejoined the others, the merchant (a grizzled unicorn stallion with a dust-colored mane and wearing trader barding) was telling Calamity and Velvet Remedy tall tales of the Manehattan Ruins. From the looks he kept giving Velvet, it was clear he had not seen so lovely a mare in... well, a very long time, if ever.

“Ghosts?” Velvet Remedy asked skeptically.

“Yep. That’s why I don’t venture any further than Fetlock myself. Well, them and the manticores.”

“Manticores?” Calamity questioned. “What would forest creatures like those be doing in the ruins of a major pre-war city?”

“Dunno. But the place is lousy with them. Best steer clear.”

Velvet wasn’t going to give up, “And with... ghosts.”

The merchant unicorn nodded. “That’s what they say, at least. Keep in mind, Manehattan isn’t like Canterlot, where the ponies died slow and painful. In Manehattan, it was like nothing. Happened so fast, the ponies’ spirits didn’t even realize they were dead.”

“Nonsense,” Velvet neighed.

The pony finally noticed my approach and gave me a big grin. “Ah, and another customer. Welcome to...” he waved a hoof at the collapsed building around him, “...the Luna-Damned

Shithole.” Behind him, a robotic owl whirred and hooted from the top of a doorless cabinet. When it opened its metal beak, I could see the gleam of a small magical energy weapon hidden inside. “It ain’t much, but it’s all mine.”

Curiosity got the better of me. “How much for the bird?”

The merchant pony laughed roughly. “Sorry, miss. Old Gearwing ain’t for sale. A merchant don’t live long in the wasteland if he travels without backup.”

I nodded. I passed Calamity the magical energy lance to add to his bartering load and sat down to work on the recording. These things were designed to be ridiculously hardy, but this one had taken one hell of a beating. As I floated out a few of my precision tools, I realized it would be a small miracle if I could get anything off of it.

I had just started working when Velvet Remedy gave a stomp. “No, no, no.” I looked up, wondering why she objected to my efforts, only to realize she was neighing to Calamity. Lowering her head, she pushed him away from the merchant.

“What’s got yer tail in a twist?” he huffed.

“You’re letting him rob you, that’s what,” she retorted. “Here, let a pony who knows a thing or two handle this.”

I watched my companions, bemused. The merchant pony was staring at them with a slight frown. Velvet Remedy returned, and while Calamity watched from behind, she ignored the pile of goods he was trying to sell the pony, not to mention everything he had been hoping to buy; she fluttered her eyelashes at the merchant, giving him a look that sparked a twitch of jealousy in my breast, and asked, “That dress over there, the one in the spring colors? How much is that?”

She haggled, turning on the charm while demurely noting the poor condition of each dress he floated over to her. Before long, she had purchased four dresses for the cost of two.

Trotting over to Calamity, her dresses in tow, she asked him politely, “Now, would you be a wonderful dear and use the fabric from these to

fix the damage our awful fight with that dragon did to the magnificent gown Littlepip gave me?"

I felt my heart do a little leap. Calamity was just staring at her, nonplussed. The merchant slowly mouthed "fight with that dragon" as he watched her.

"Whatcha do that fer? Ya didn't even get any medical supplies."

Velvet shrugged off the question. "Pretty please?" she added smiling at Calamity, who got quickly to work.

I went back to tinkering with the recording. After the better part of an hour, I was pleased by my progress. I realized the contents of the recording wouldn't be worth the effort, but by now it had become a challenge. The actual message didn't really matter.

Calamity had finished repairing Velvet Remedy's gorgeous dress. I was impressed. It almost looked as good as new. Velvet smiled and gave him a small kiss on the cheek (eliciting another flutter of jealousy from me), then took the dress and trotted around behind some rubble to put it on. (Which, truth be told, made no sense to me.)

My PipBuck made its last scan of the message, reconstructing it. I had salvaged almost the entire thing. I slipped in my earbloom and listened to what an hour's work had gotten me. I knew better than to expect much, but if it turned out to be a door-to-door advert recording for ties, I was going to be a little miffed.

"Whitelip, I'm sorry to miss you this week. You know that seeing you is one of the high points of my week, but I just got the most amazing call. Twilight Sparkle, yes the Twilight Sparkle, called me. Right out of the blue. Isn't that amazing? I mean, I knew her back when she was nothing and I was...

"Nevermind. I'm just so surprised she even remembers me. But no, she invited me to Manehattan this weekend to talk about a proposal. Can you imagine? Me, working for the Ministry of Magic! And when the Mare of the Ministry herself personally calls you up to pitch the offer, you know it has to be important.

"I... I hesitate to say it, but I'm back. Oh yes, Trixie's life is about to finally turn around!

"um... I don't know how long I'll be in Manehattan; but just to be safe, go ahead and leave my usual order on the doorstep: three bottles of milk and a carton of butter. I'll pay you next week. I promise."

All of that effort, and I'd salvaged an order to the local milk-buck? I'd promised myself I wouldn't be bothered, but I kinda was.

Velvet Remedy had re-emerged, looking impossibly stunning. I'd already seen her in this dress and it still made my legs weak. The merchant pony had not, and was clearly smitten.

"Now then, let's get down to business," Velvet said with a gracious smile, floating the magical energy lance from the pile of goods Calamity had been trying to sell. "Now, I'm not sure you have the caps for something like this, but I'm sure we can come to an arrangement."

"N-not sure I have...?" The merchant tried to regain his footing. "Lady, I'd say that's worth..."

"Quite a lot," Velvet smiled. "Consider: all the power of a magical energy weapon, but in the form of a lance that anypony could use without special training? A devastatingly effective weapon that will never run out of bullets or sparkle packs. No spending your hard-earned caps on ammo; no threat of having to stop and reload at a critical point in battle."

Velvet Remedy lifted it up dramatically. "And just look at its condition! Why, the gemstone alone is worth more than the meager medical supplies your delightful little Shithole has to offer."

She paused, eyeing the magical energy lance. "Why, on second thought, I can't imagine parting with it. Sure, it's a little heavy, but..."

"All right, all right," the merchant unicorn broke in. "What do you want for it?"

I looked over to Calamity. From his expression, he was thinking the same thing. From now on, Velvet Remedy would do all our bartering.



The body of the radroach crunched grossly under my hoof. I quickly scraped the radroach gunk from my hoof using a collapsed road sign. We'd slept at Trixie's Cottage the night before, and had made good time over the course of the morning.

According to my PipBuck, the maze of blackened, ruined homes we were pushing through had once been the suburb of Fetlock. We were taking it slow; such a large area meant that there were still a dusting of scavenge-worthy items to be found, even outside of locked safes and trunks. Sadly, no medical supplies. Velvet was trying to use the few supplies we got from the merchant sparingly, cutting healing bandages in halves or thirds, but still insisted on cleaning and dressing cuts and scrapes to avoid infection.

Velvet Remedy squealed happily as she opened up an old refrigerator and found several bottles of still-pure water inside. Our canteens were almost empty, and the few working faucets I had found made my PipBuck clickity-click at the radiation levels in the water. Her find was a blessing straight from Luna.

There was no shelter to speak of, and red spots were always crawling across my E.F.S. compass. Mostly radroaches or the occasional giant mutant hedgehogs. The magical radiation that had soaked into the water had twisted a multitude of wasteland's animal inhabitants into grotesque and often monstrous versions of their original species. Most creatures had not survived the transformations.

But at least it wasn't raiders or slavers. It was a relief to not be battling other ponies. Velvet Remedy was beginning to develop skill with her needler pistol; her moral reservations about killing clearly did not apply to ravenous and hostile beasts.

Calamity swooped up to us, having been scouting ahead. "We're in luck. Ah think Ah've spotted someplace fer us t' crash fer the night."

Velvet Remedy and I let him lead the way. Two blocks later, we came upon the hulk of a passenger skywagon. This one was in far better

shape than the one I had taken a shortcut through back under the Cloudsdayle outskirts. The paint was blackened by fire and flaking away with age, and what lay beneath was as much rust as metal. But it was fully intact, having been resting at the wagon-stop when the megaspell went off rather than having fallen from the sky.

It had also been loaded with passengers who, along with the wagon pony harnessed to the front, had been burned alive by the rolling wall of bale flame that had swept through Fetlock. The passenger wagon was full of charred skeletons and burnt luggage.

"You want us to bed down in there?" Velvet Remedy asked, looking appalled. "Calamity, that's grim. Even for you."

I stared at the wagon full of pony skeletons and found myself wondering who they had been. What had their lives been like? Had they been happy? I wondered if the wagon had been heading into Manehattan. Were these ponies all heading into work. Were some of them friends, chatting about the shopping they would do?

I squelched those thoughts under a strong hoof. The apocalypse was already a daily assault of horror and sadness without making it worse by actually thinking about it. Doing that could only drive a pony to suicide or madness.

Looking away, I felt a tiny ember of joy as I spotted the flickering light of a Sparkle-Cola machine tucked into a nook just around the corner from the wagon-stop. "I'll be right back," I announced, leaving Calamity and Velvet to clean out the passenger wagon. Or argue about it. Whichever.

I trotted around the wall and into the nook, which I immediately realized was much larger than I had imagined. The red dots on my E.F.S. had become so ubiquitous that I'd stopped paying attention to them. Big mistake.

The manticore turned, took one look at the intruder who had just blithely clopped into its den, and let out a roar that blasted my mane back. The carrion stench of its breath let me know I was dinner.

I stared up at the huge, brutish monster with its mighty forepaws, huge wings and venomous tail and was very glad I hadn't had anything to drink in several hours.

I didn't have any of my weapons ready; I hadn't wanted to waste precious ammo on things I could kill with a buck or a stomp. The manticore certainly didn't fall into that category, but I spun, throwing a kick with both hindhooves at its nose.

It was like bucking a brick wall. Instead of knocking the manticore back, I sent myself forward in a faceplant. The manticore lifted a paw full of large claws and swiped at my back. If it hadn't been for Ditzzy Doo's armoring, the blow might have cut through my spine. Instead, pain spashed through my bruised back. I scrambled onto my hooves and ran.

The manticore gave chase, bouncing after me. I am short; it was bigger than several stacked apple carts. The chase was brief.

The manticore headbutted me, sending me flying. I hit the street hard and rolled until I hit what was left of the wall of the hardware shop across the street. The manticore charged at me as I struggled to me feet, dazed.

The sound of Calamity's battle saddle cracked through the air. Blood erupted from one of the manticore's front legs and it stumbled, missing me to crash instead into an old lamppost. The lamppost tore out of the ground and toppled with an iron thud.

As the manticore recovered, a half-burned dress that must have come from the luggage littering the wagon flew through the air on a field of Velvet Remedy's magic and tied itself around the manticore's head like a blindfold.

The manticore lashed out blindly with its poisonous, scorpion-like tail. One of the strikes hit the broken sidewalk less than a foot from me.

Calamity fired again, this time into the side of the creature. I floated out Little Macintosh and took aim, backing away. The manticore

shook it's head violently, tossing the blindfold. I got one good shot off, hitting it's tail. The power of Little Macintosh cleaved the manticore's tail in two.

It roared in pain and launched itself at me. This time, I was ready, and dodged swiftly out of the way. I turned back towards it, leveling Little Macintosh at the manticore's backside. The monster spread its wings and launched itself into the air, flying towards Calamity.

Calamity got one more shot off, blossoms of crimson sprouting in its chest, before the creature plowed into him, knocking Calamity from the sky. Worried for my friend, I turned to see where he had fallen as it circled back. Calamity groaned, not getting up but at least looking intact. His hat was laying on the street not far away.

Velvet Remedy trotted up to me. "You're the telekinetic expert -- try these." She was levitating along with her a stack of sawblades from the hardware store.

As the manticore swooped towards us, I filled the air with spinning death.



Velvet Remedy finished watching the Ministry of Peace memory orb (for at least the twelfth time) and was now pretending not to watch me cooking manticore meat. According to my PipBuck, it was relatively healthy... at least as far as meat went. Velvet was eating our last can of corn.

Calamity had polished off our last two cans of beans the better part of an hour ago and then crawled under the passenger wagon to "look at somethin'." He had yet to come up for air. It was getting quite dark. The wagon was still the best option for a place to sleep, but we would have to do it in shifts.

My whole body ached from getting knocked around by the manticore. I was almost getting used to being in a constant state of pain. Calamity had gotten worse, but his concussion seemed mercifully

minor. Only Velvet Remedy made it through unscathed. Still, the fight was worth my aches and pains; the venom sacks from the manticore's stinging tail were the last thing I needed to build a poisoned dart gun from the schematics I'd found in the old Appleloosa armory.

With a sigh, Velvet Remedy clopped over to the wagon and crouched down, peering under it. "Oh, come out. There's nothing under there that could be this interesting," she judged. "You took a really bad fall back there and you still haven't let me examine you." With fierce determination, she added, "And this time, I want you to strip completely out of that saddle and let me give you a full examination."

I popped open one of the Sparkle-Colas I'd found inside the vending machine after the battle and took a sip. Warm, but not quite flat, and deliciously carroty.

Calamity crawled obediently out from under the wagon, a big grin on his face. "Great news," he announced. "It's pretty much intact."

"Whatever are you talking about," Velvet Remedy asked, cocking her head.

Calamity nodded back towards the passenger wagon. I found myself questioning his definition of intact. The windows were all shattered and there were several gaping holes in the roof. A spot the size of two hooves had rusted through on the left side.

"What Ah'm talkin' about is that unlike the one y'all saw before, this beauty is more than just an explosion waitin' t' happen." Calamity turned to the wagon and smiled. "Ah could fix 'er up. All she needs is a flux regulator."

"She?" Velvet whinnied.

"Ayep." Calamity flapped his wings, lifting into the air.

I raised an eyebrow. "A flux regulator? That's a pretty specific piece of equipment. Not something we're likely to find just laying around."

Calamity came back down to earth. “Yeah, Ah know. But jus’ think. If we did, then Ah could pull alla us, plus any equipment we wanted t’ carry, all over the Equestrian Wasteland. No more mutli-day trots across infested landscape.”

Velvet Remedy nickered. “Oh yes. Because your track record with vehicles has been stellar so far.”

I remembered the train. And the apple cart. Maybe climbing into one that was also a bomb wasn’t such a good idea. I didn’t say so however. No reason to smother Calamity’s enthusiasm. It wasn’t as if we had the part he needed to fix it, and any further hesitations could be put off until we did. Which, in all likelihood, would be never.

Velvet, meanwhile, was prodding Calamity to get out of his battle saddle and barding. “I know you made it yourself, and you prefer to wear it, but really... I’ve been with you two for over a week now, and I still haven’t seen your cutie mark. There’s fondness for sense of fashion and there’s just plain being ridiculous.”

My attention had turned towards my dinner, but I perked at that. Come to think of it, I’d never seen Calamity’s cutie mark either. He was always wearing at least his barding and saddle bags, except when he bathed. And I’d always given him privacy for that, albeit mostly out of disinterest in watching a stallion clean himself.

“That’s cuz Ah don’t have one.”

What? No way. My own cutie mark had taken forever to show, but I’d still had it for years. How could a grown buck not have his yet.

“Oh,” Velvet Remedy looked away, seeming unsure of how she should respond to that.

Calamity gave a low, humorless chuckle. “Ain’t like that. Ah used t’ have one. I just don’t anymore.”

“What!?” Velvet Remedy echoed my thoughts, albeit more dramatically.

Calamity looked at the two of us then let out a long sigh. “Well, hell, Ah suppose y’all might as well know.” He shucked himself out of his battle harness and started tugging at the straps of his barding. “It’s been branded off.”

“What? Why?” Velvet stammered. “Who would do that?”

“Muh brothers,” Calamity said, less evenly than he intended to. “Look, that’s just what they do t’ pegasus like me.”

“Like you?” I asked, remembering he’d said that before.

Calamity nodded. “Ah told y’all ‘bout the pegasi. Well, they say that when that megaspell wiped out Cloudsdale, all the pegasus ponies abandoned Equestria and hid behind their ceiling of clouds. All, that is, except one.”

I had stopped eating; it seemed disrespectful. But I still took a swig from the Sparkle-Cola as I listened to what was obviously going to be a story.

“They say that Rainbow Dash saw what the other pegasus ponies were doing, and turned away from them just as they turned away from all the ponies below...”

“Who?” Velvet Remedy interrupted as politely as she could.

Calamity smiled. “Rainbow Dash. The best of us, in some ponies’ opinion. The one who trained the pegasi into the most elite and feared fighting force both in and beyond Equestria. The mare of the Ministry of Awesome. The one who...”

I swear Calamity had waited until I was taking another drink to say that. I coughed violently, Sparkle-Cola spraying out of my mouth and nostrils. I would be smelling carrots for a week.

“The Ministry of *WHAT!?*” I gasped, tears in my eyes. I knew I was further derailing Calamity’s story, but I didn’t care.

Calamity grinned at my reaction. “The Ministry of Awesome.”

“And what, pray tell, did they do?” Velvet Remedy inquired.

Calamity shrugged. "As far as Ah know, nothing."

He elaborated, "Remember when Watcher told us 'bout the Ministries? Well, Ah'd heard it a bit different. The pegasi never told 'bout any of those other mares, but they talked 'bout Rainbow Dash. An' the story Ah heard was that when Princess Luna told her that she would be given her own ministry, Rainbow Dash immediately proclaimed, 'Well, then mine will be the Ministry of Awesome!'

"And when asked what such a Ministry would do, she replied, 'Oh, they'll figure it out.' Rainbow Dash herself was too busy fightin' t' win the war t' be bothered with runnin' some gov'ment office."

I just stared. There were simply no words.

"That's... interesting," Velvet Remedy finally stated. "So this Rainbow Dash was a hero to the pegasus ponies."

Calamity's eyes narrowed. "Emphasis on was. She didn't cotton to their closin' up the sky an' retreatin'. So she flew off. Never was seen again. An' the pegasi? They tossed their opinion of her faster than a filly whose hat is on fire..."

Calamity finished unstrapping his barding. It fell away, revealing a flank marred by a magical brand. His cutie mark had been obliterated, replaced by a gruesome scar that looked like a cloud with a lightning bolt.

"I'm a Dashite," Calamity said. "To them it means 'Traitor'."



Thunder rumbled overhead.

It wasn't even noon, and the sky had grown dark enough to be mistaken for early night. The first drop of rain touched down on my nose, followed by a second on my left ear.

We had moved beyond Fetlock into a rolling area of grassy hills occasionally marred by incongruous patches of sand. There was a lake visible at the bottom of the next hill, with a shack and several sunken

rowboats on the shore. As we approached, my PipBuck ever-so-helpfully told me it was “SteelHooves Shack” and that I had found it.

I floated out Little Macintosh and used the scope to get a closer look. There were tools lined up against the wall, and I could see the glow from an operational terminal in a sheltered outside alcove. And... were those turrets? There were metal things on the ground near each corner of the shack, hidden by camouflage. It might have just been my recent work on Junction R-7 that had me thinking that way; if they were turrets, they were mostly buried.

“Wait!” I called out, now spotting marred holes in the grassy hillside all around the shack, the aftermath of mines that had exploded. The grass was just high enough that the mines would be fully concealed until you were standing on them.

Calamity and Velvet Remedy both stopped, looking towards me with concern.

I opened my mouth to explain about the mines, but another voice cut me off.

“Well, look who we have!” The voice was regal, majestic and terrifying.

The winged unicorn suddenly appeared directly in front of us, shimmering into existence. Velvet Remedy let out a short squeal.

“We remember you from Appleloosa.”

My jaw dropped. No. No way...

But as I stared, I knew that this was a different pseudo-goddess than the one in the slaver town. Her coloration was nearly identical, but there were differences in her face, mane and flanks.

Patches of air on either side of us rippled and two more of the wicked winged unicorns appeared.

“Invisibility spells?” Velvet Remedy complained, apparently beginning to join in my conviction that the wasteland simply hated us.

The pseudo-goddesses surrounded us. Each one was different, but only subtly, like they were all siblings. I looked around frantically, but the rolling hills were completely bereft of boxcars. A sunken rowboat wasn't going to cut it.

"You're not the prize we were looking for," one of them said.

"But it will be a joy killing you anyways," the third almost purred.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Counter Canter - Your fancy hoofwork (or agile flying if you are a pegasus pony) keeps you out of harm's way. Opponents suffer a -5 to combat skills when attacking you.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



STEELHOOVES

“The Stables were never meant to save anypony.”

Explosions!

The world around me was rent apart by a cacophony of violent light and bombastic sound, shocking heat following a roar beyond the might of thunder. The twilight darkness was annihilated by too-bright brilliance.

Time slowed to a crawl, as if sensory overload was causing my own brain to lag. Fire and shrapnel tore at me, sparks of pain igniting all over my body. The roar that filled the world died with a high-pitched whine as I lost my hearing. I was rooted in place, unable to make my body move. Blood splattered across my face as the pseudo-goddess standing in front of me tore apart, the parts of her body savagely flung in every direction.

I felt myself thrown to the ground. Velvet Remedy covered me with her body, her shield forming around us with aching slowness. I could feel a sticky warmth as her blood seeped down, mixing with mine. Only belatedly did I realize that I was not the one being attacked. The second pseudo-goddess was turning, wide-eyed as she

brought up her own magical shield. But it was too late for her; the rapid-fire explosions that were killing Velvet Remedy and me just by proximity were ripping directly into the creature. The pseudo-goddess's shield rippled, fluctuated and died before it could fully manifest. Then she too was consumed in a mutilating blaze.

Time snapped back as the rain of explosions momentarily stopped. My vision was warped with afterimages of the creatures, their obliterating bodies flash-burned into my sight. My ears still heard nothing but a distant, nauseating buzz. But now I could see the source of the massive attack. And I had seen this thing before. It was the poster from the recruitment center, come to life before us. A pony completely concealed in steel-grey armor, even its tail. It was a mighty relic from the war, a "Steel Ranger". A bright lamp on its forehead spotlighted its target, and the huge gun on the right side of its monstrous battle saddle began to fire again.

But the last pseudo-goddess had been given plenty of time to bring up her shield as her sisters were slaughtered. And the explosions -- which I now saw were metal apples similar to those I had used on the dragon, only being fired at terrifying speed -- detonated against the shield while she stood inside, looking cozy, unconcerned, and only mildly pissed. The flames illuminated her midnight-blue coat and sickly green hair, and made her eyes sparkle like gateways to hell.

Again, the Steel Ranger's grenade machine gun stopped. And now a large box on the left side of its battle saddle sprung open, unleashing two rockets which arched through the air towards the creature, leaving contrails of smoke in their wake.

The pseudo-goddess merely lowered her head, a spark of light bursting from her horn. In an instant, the two rockets had reversed course. The Steel Ranger tried to step back, but there was no time. The rockets impacted directly into our armored would-be savior, the explosion tossing the massive body back down the hill. The grass erupted in smoke and dirt and flame as the tumbling body bounced over several mines before coming to a stop, motionless and seemingly lifeless at the foot of the shack below.

Velvet's weight bore down on me. We waited for the Steel Ranger to get up, and the world seemed to wait with us. When after long moments it did not stir, the pseudo-goddess strode forward towards it. I could hear her laughter, even though my ears could hear nothing but that awful ringing. In the back of my mind, I realized I must have been right -- telepathy played a part in the pseudo-goddesses' threat.

"See now, how the so-called 'Mighty Alicorn Hunter' has fallen!" the majestic and cruel voice of the pseudo-goddess purred in my head. "The Goddess will be most pleased."

The impact of bullets created twin sparks on the pseudo-goddess' shield. Limping and bloodied from the storm of fire and shrapnel, Calamity strode forward. I could see his mouth moving. Undoubtedly, he was saying something snide and witty.

The pseudo-goddess (or alicorn, by her own title) turned and snorted derisively.

Calamity shot again to just as futile an effect.

I shrugged my haunches, trying to tell Velvet Remedy to get off of me, but she did not. Her body was warm, dead weight. I realized her shield spell had dropped, and felt a surge of panic. I heaved, rolling her off, and turned to find my beautiful companion unconscious, her hide flayed by shrapnel, bleeding excessively. With a flare of my horn, I opened one of her medical boxes and started pulling out what supplies we had left. My heart screamed at seeing how little it was. I may have screamed too, but I couldn't hear.

I pulled open the other, hoping for more, but all that was left in the second medical box was her dress, a bottle of Buck and...

...the Party-Time Mint-als!

That voice in my head roared. Velvet Remedy was counting on me. She'd die if I couldn't help her. I needed to be smarter right now! I needed to be better right now! I needed those Mint-als!

The little memory orb rolled out and fell into the grass as I tore the tin of Party-Time Mint-als from her saddle box and floated it to me. A

craving hit me, and I had to force myself to only take one. Make them last. One would be...

The world became so much brighter, clearer, cleaner. I was aware of each raindrop as it struck me. I was aware of each pain, each bleeding gash in my own body. My mind sped down pathways of thought.

Once again, brilliant light burst all about us, this time carrying a choking stench of ozone as the alicorn summoned lightning from the thunderclouds and struck Calamity to the ground. I turned, trying to cry out, but I had no voice. Or I did, but could not hear it.

Calamity shuddered, twitching on the ground. He was not dead, not even yet unconscious, but he was in no condition to fight. The alicorn didn't seem to care. A malicious smile broke over her features, cold and wicked, as motes of pinkish-purple light ignited around her head, growing and shaping into magical arrows.

I tried to get to my hooves, but my legs wouldn't work. A wave of felling nausea dropped me. I knew I too was suffering from loss of blood, and the ringing in my ears was shredding my sense of balance. But I also knew that Calamity and Velvet were about to die. So might I, but I would die saving them.

And in the sheer brilliance of Mint-al-enhanced acumen, I knew just how to do it.

My telekinesis did not fail me, even when my body did. I brought my sniper rifle to me as I simultaneously lifted the memory orb and floated it towards the alicorn, moving it so that it approached from her flank. I felt a pang of conscience risking something so precious to Velvet.

The pseudo-goddess turned, catching the movement out of the corner of her eye. She reacted before she recognized it, expecting a grenade, focusing her magic against it to send it hurling back at me.

The memory orb glowed softly as the alicorn touched it with focused magic. Her eyes went wide, her shield dropping and the forming cascade of magical arrows evaporating as the alicorn was lost inside the memory.

Slipping into the targeting zen of S.A.T.S., I lined up the headshot and pulled the trigger.



“No!” Velvet Remedy intoned harshly, her voice sounding distant and muffled through the buzzing in my ears. She floated the tin of Party-Time Mint-als away from me before I had a chance to take yet another. I’d taken two already, one before killing the alicorn and a second to stave off the massive depression that I knew would come when the first wore off.

“But...!” I tried to come up with something that Velvet Remedy would buy. I was amazing now; I could talk anyone into anything. “At least let me hold onto them. I might need them.” And yet somehow, I couldn’t convince the most beautiful mare in the wasteland to let me keep a tin full of medicine.

I’d administered the last of the medical potions to Velvet Remedy. The magical liquid seemed to work achingly slowly at closing her wounds. Now she was left with just the healing bandages to aid Calamity and myself. We didn’t have anywhere near enough. She was still very weak from the loss of blood, and was having trouble standing. Calamity needed a medical brace to fix his leg; Velvet Remedy didn’t want to risk a mending spell until it was properly set. More, he needed serious bed rest to recover from the lightning strike.

There was one more.

I had to wave Velvet Remedy back before I approached the unmoving armored figure crumpled against the shack below. Harnessing my levitation, I could pass over the minefield safely. Velvet Remedy could not.

Between the alicorn’s thought-words and the label my PipBuck had spontaneously given the shack, it didn’t take Party-Time Mint-al-enhanced smarts to realize that this had probably been SteelHooves.

The great alicorn hunter... meaning there were more of these. Possibly a lot more. The thought was frightening. SteelHooves had exterminated two of them with a combination of surprise and epic firepower. It was by wits and luck that I had killed the third before she slew us all. Last time, I needed a boxcar. These creatures were not invincible, but they were *powerful* and very hard to kill.

The metal stallion (or, at least, I was assuming stallion based on the form of the armor) had not moved since the battle. I crouched down next to the fallen Ranger (several of my bandages shifting and coming undone as I did so, my wounds oozing blood). Up close, the armor was even more impressive. It had its own air filtration system, complete life support, even mechanized drug injection. The damage from the rockets was far less than it had any right to be. Still, the armor had caved in at the point of impact, gruesomely crushing the pony inside.

I tried to find a way to remove the helmet. If there was one, it was well concealed. But I found a jackpoint that would allow my PipBuck to interface with the helmet's own arcane technology matrix. I pulled out a tool from my utility barding, already suspecting that the helmet included its own E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. equivalents, if not more. Whoever had designed the armor must have worked tail-twined-with-tail alongside Stable-Tec.

"Don't do that." The voice from inside the helmet was low, rumbling, exceptionally masculine.

I jumped back, startled. There was somepony alive in there! Fueled by Party-Time confidence, approached, trying to reassure him. "I'm a certified Stable-Tec PipBuck Technician," I lied, but only a little, "I'm sure I can help."

"No. You can't." The voice spoke, but the body still did not move. The helmet did not even turn to look at me. "My armor took a crippling hit. Everything is off-line. Medical, self-repair... the entire spell matrix has crashed."

I sat back on my haunches, wincing as several sharp bolts of pain lashed up through my flanks. "Can you..."

“Without magical power, I cannot even move. I will die here. I am, truly, already dead.” The low voice in the armor sounded resigned to the idea, and at peace with it. “But I took them with me. And, if I am not mistaken, I saved the Stable Dweller. As a final act, it was a good one.”

I was taken aback. My overblown reputation. A deep discomfort stirred inside me. It wasn’t right for other ponies to risk their lives for me, thinking of me as something special.

I stared at the Steel Ranger, not dead but paralyzed. If the armor had no power, jacking into it wouldn’t do any good. I looked back towards Velvet Remedy, wishing I had actually taken some time to learn more about medicine from her rather than just relying on her skills. I contemplated lifting her over the minefield.

Turning back to the fallen armored pony, “Okay... SteelHooves, right?”

“How did you... oh. Of course.”

Of course what? Shaking off the confusion, I continued, “I’m bringing our medic over.” Without another word, I turned and focused my magic on Velvet Remedy. She floated into the air with a shocked eep. She started to float through the air towards us.

“Littlepip, put me down!”

“Minefield,” I said casually.

“Okay, move me, *then* put me down.”

A moment later, she had joined us. She gave me a ladylike nicker and turned to look over the armored hunter. As I informed her of what he had told me, my mind flashed to the poster I had seen on the wall of Candi’s clinic: “You don’t have to be a Steel Ranger to be a Hero. Join the Ministry of Peace today.” I looked at Velvet Remedy, knowing she must be familiar with the same poster from somewhere, and wondered if she was remembering it as well.



"You need not bother," SteelHooves insisted. "There's nothing to be done. I've had a good gallop..."

"Nonsense," Velvet Remedy neighed, brushing off the Steel Ranger's morbidity. "Now we just have to get you out..."

"No," the low, gravelly voice said again.

"Sorry?" Velvet asked, confused. She had spent several minutes examining the armor, looking increasingly worried. "Even if the armor protected you from burns and slashes, you've suffered massive blunt trauma. The internal damage could..." As she spoke, she began to wrap the armor in a soft magical glow.

"Don't remove my armor."

Velvet Remedy whinnied. "Oh please, I just went through this with Calamity. I can't treat you if I can't see you..."

"If you remove my armor, I will die."

I blinked, gaping at him, eyeing the huge dent crushing into his side. I didn't possess Velvet Remedy's medical insight, but I could imagine that the armor was the only thing holding him together.

Velvet pulled back, canceling her spell. "Well, that seems like a design flaw."

"The armor is meant to keep me alive," SteelHooves said a touch defensively. "Open the armor plate over my left flank." Velvet Remedy did so, revealing a system for administering drugs and medical potions, everything from Buck to...

"I don't even recognize some of these drugs," Velvet said, in surprise.

"The armor has a doctor enchantment. If it was working, I would be fully healed already."

I was still looking over the injection system, casually observing, "It doesn't have a system for Party..."

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy scolded, silencing me.

I stepped back, cowed. I turned my mind from the drugs, instead focusing on the failure of the magically powered armor's spell matrix. If this was a PipBuck, I could easily...

"Wait," I blurted, already knowing exactly what to do.

Velvet Remedy gave me a look. "Littlepip..." she hissed dangerously. I couldn't blame her. It had been only a second since I made that other observation; she didn't have any appreciation for how fast I could think right now. (If she did, maybe she wouldn't be so fast to take my Party-Time Mint-als away.)

"No, I know how to fix him! I can restore power to the armor and reboot the spell matrix." I beamed. "The suit designer obviously incorporated Stable-Tec arcane technology. It's really not that different from fixing a PipBuck."

Velvet's expression softened. "Well then, don't just stand there," she smiled, backing out of my way, careful not to move closer to the minefield.

I trotted forward, and came crashing back to reality. Recognition of my mistake mixed with the crushing depression that flooded me in the wake of Party-Time Mint-als wearing off. In a moment, I was stupid, ignorant and dumb.

"I-I can't," I moaned.

"But you just said..."

"I don't have the tools." I felt like crying. The Steel Ranger was going to die, imprisoned in his armor, because I *wasn't* a certified Stable-Tec PipBuck Technician. My utility barding didn't include a spell matrix master key. Reluctantly, I admitted as much.

Velvet Remedy walked to me, wobbling a little, still faint from loss of blood. She wrapped her tail over me, whispering comfortingly into my ear.

“A spell matrix master key?” The voice of SteelHooves sounded hopeful rather than resigned. “You might be able to find one in Stable Twenty-Nine.”



We were going into another Stable. I felt myself tremble at the thought. From apprehension more than physical weakness, I assumed; Velvet Remedy had rebound my wounds.

Calamity limped up to me. “Remember, Littlepip. This isn’t your Stable.” I nodded. I was still in the grips of post-PTM depression. I knew I wasn’t in any condition, mentally, to be doing this. But SteelHooves needed the help, and we owed him.

“I’ve changed my mind,” the Steel Ranger protested. “I cannot allow you to go into a Stable for me.” His sense of hope had swiftly been squelched by a stubborn nobility that I both understood and rejected. I wasn’t the only one.

“Oh? Well then, come right over here and stop us,” Velvet Remedy suggested. Then added, “Oh right. You can’t.”

“Your bedside manner is horrible,” the voice from inside the armor reported.

I looked at the three of us. We were in no condition to travel into unknown and likely hostile territory. Each one of us could barely stand.

“I won’t tell you where the entrance is,” SteelHooves said dissuasively.

Calamity whinnied. “Ponyhole cover marked Stable Twenty-Nine? Near the Fetlock passenger wagon stop?” SteelHooves pointedly said nothing. Calamity leaned over and whispered, “And Velvet Remedy thought there was nothin’ interestin’ under the passenger wagon.”

It took us much longer to reach it than I remembered. We were moving gingerly, avoiding marks of red on my E.F.S. compass. Right now, I felt a few radroaches could finish us off.

Calamity was flying, keeping all weight off his leg. He looked at the passenger wagon and announced too-cheerfully, “Well, I hope your levitation is back to its full impressiveness, Littlepip. Unless we’ve found a flux regulator and nopony’s told me, moving that thing will be up to you.”

I laid down. I needed to focus fully on the passenger wagon (*Sky Bandit Stages*, I noted pointlessly), and that meant not diverting my energies to remaining upright. My horn lit up as I concentrated on the huge wagon. Magical power enveloped it. I pushed, converging all my will onto moving the vehicle. My horn flared. A layer of overglow burst around it. The wagon began to rock, groaning. Sweat broke across my forehead. I began to have trouble breathing. Somewhere distant, Velvet Remedy was being concerned, but I blocked it out. A second layer of overglow erupted around my horn, and the whole wagon lifted several feet into the air and was shoved back onto the sidewalk.

I let it down gently, then collapsed, exhausted. I could see the ponyhole cover. Yay. Sleep now.



“How long was I out?” I asked, aghast.

“Long enough to get some much needed sleep,” Velvet soothed. “I rested my eyes a little myself.”

We were in a short maintenance tunnel. On one end, a door led to even more maintenance tunnels that snaked all under Fetlock. On the other, three steps led up to the massive door of Stable Twenty-Nine. Calamity was standing on three hooves (his crippled foreleg lifted) and staring at the control mechanism.

“Well, this was a bust,” he proclaimed. It looked like Stable Twenty-Nine had never opened. And without an override password, it was unlikely that we would be getting in. Still, I went to work at it. My mind still felt sluggish, and I considered munching a Mint-al (even the non-Party flavor would help), but I didn’t want Velvet Remedy or

Calamity to think I needed them. I didn't. They just made me a better me.

After invading the control system and thoroughly probing it, I found something interesting. "I... think I've found a backdoor."

"Where?" Calamity asked, looking up at the ponyhole. "Is it far?"

I shook my head. "No, I mean, into the system. A three-part key is required to bypass the normal security."

"What kind of key?" Velvet Remedy questioned.

"Voice recognition. Three different voices are required," I informed them. Then, before anypony pointed out the fact that there were coincidentally three of us, I explained, "It has to be the right three voices. What is being said doesn't seem to matter, just who's saying it."

It was a very interesting backdoor at that. I wondered just what prompted such a design. And if all Stables had the same security hole.

"Whose three voices?"

I thought a moment, and cursed how slow my brain was. "I... um..." Then I remembered Stable Two's override code. CMC3BFF. "I think I know."

The first voice was the one that took the longest, simply because I didn't have a recording of it. Instead, we sat there listening to DJ Pon3 on the radio, waiting for his selection of songs to cycle through. For the first and only time, I was actually grateful that his radio broadcast had such a limited selection of music.

"Good evening, everypony! This is your humble host, DJ Pon3, master of the airwaves. And it's just about time for me to turn in. But first, the news! Looks like our wasteland crusader from Stable Two is an equal-opportunity savior. From the reports I'm getting, she and her companions helped out a bunch of raiders up at Shattered Hoof from being enslaved and decimated by an attacking slaver army. And then, because you can't have a cupcake without icing, she killed a *dragon*!"

Luna dammit, why wasn't it ever "Calamity and his companions?" Or Velvet Remedy and her entourage?

"Don't know if I agree with you on this one, kid. Saving raiders? Some monsters deserve to be enslaved."

Perfect.

"Also in the news: got another report of hellhounds attacking travelers in the wasteland between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. Honestly, ponies, if you have to travel that way, make sure you have a heavily armed escort. And if you don't, just don't. This has been a DJ Pon3 pony survival tip. Tune in for more tips in this series, including 'Grenades aren't for eating' and 'Raiders do not want to be your friend.' But first, it's Sweetie Belle singing, 'The Dark Days Are Over'..."

I leapt up. "Here we go, ponies!"

Back at the controls, I fed the voice pattern recognition spell the first few lines of the song, mentally noting to record the song for use if I had the deep misfortune to have to enter a Stable a third time.

I followed with snippets of two recordings:

"The override code for opening the door to Stable Two is... CMC3BFF."

"Hello! My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLoPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer..."

With a mighty hiss and a draconic groan of protest, the door to Stable Twenty-Nine began to move.

I turned to find Velvet Remedy walking past me to face the door. The gorgeous mare had donned her beautiful dress and groomed her mane. I shot a look to Calamity, who merely shrugged. "um... Velvet?" The dress hid most of her bandages.

"We're meeting the ponies of another Stable for the first time. We want to put our best hoof forward," she said aristocratically. "Especially if they've never had outside visitors before. We want to look like

diplomats,” her eye moved to look at me without turning her head. “If you two went in first, we’d look like invaders.”

The vast metal door swung away and Velvet Remedy stepped into Stable Twenty-Nine regally and without hesitation. Calamity limped up to me as I watched her disappear inside. “She’s really somethin’, ain’t she.”

“Yes...” I said, feeling a little dumbstruck. I glanced at Calamity, who was staring through the door at Velvet. “...she...” I did a double-take. Calamity wasn’t looking at Velvet Remedy, he was *looking* at her. Something broke in my brain. “...no!”

No, that was just... no.

“No?” he asked, confused, his eyes not leaving her haunches.

I stammered, recovering. “no, not no. I mean... yes. Yes she is. She’s...” Mine.

Dammit!



This was *not fair*.

I loved Velvet Remedy. I had since long before Calamity ever met her. Yes, yes I knew I didn’t actually have a chance with her. She was... *her!* And I was just... me. And I knew all about swinging barn doors.

But... arrugh.

I took the mental image of Calamity successfully wooing Velvet Remedy when I could not and shoved it into a deep dark hole. Then filled in that hole. Then built a house on top of that hole and moved into it.

I focused instead on the pristine but extremely gloomy interior of Stable Twenty-Nine. At first glance, it looked perfectly preserved. A gasp from Velvet Remedy shattered that illusion.

Velvet was backing away from the remains of a skeleton dangling overhead from part of the door mechanism, its midsection pulverized.

Velvet wavered, looking about to faint. I grimaced, looking to Calamity, who rushed over to steady her. This was an ominous start.

Two metal doors offered us two options: Maintenance or Atrium. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was clear of any red. For that matter, it was completely clear of anything other than my two companions. There was no life in this Stable. At least, not within the range of my PipBuck's spell. The Stable was utterly silent, save for the ever-present high-pitched hum of the lights and the gentle rumble of the generators.

"This place is a tomb," Calamity voiced.

Maintenance should take us directly to the PipBuck Technician's stall. But the Atrium would lead to the clinic, and we were in desperate need of medical supplies. On the off chance there was something lurking in Stable Twenty-Nine, we needed the medical supplies before we did any wandering. I passed my logic by Velvet Remedy and Calamity, and they both agreed, Calamity wincing as the hoof of his injured leg brushed the floor.

I stepped forward and the door to the Atrium slid up. Stepping in, my eyes immediately fell on the skeletons of at least three dozen other ponies. They were strewn about the room, but the highest concentration was right at my hooves. I had to use telekinesis to create a path through the bones of the ponies "lucky enough" to have made it into a Stable before the megaspell destroyed Manehattan. I felt anger biting at the back of my head. I reminded myself it wasn't my Stable.

There was a lot of other debris in the Atrium as well. Bottles of beer and whiskey, scotch and wine, most of them empty and many shattered. Dresses and gentlepony-wear turned greasy with decay. In the far back, a sound system was riddled with bullet holes.

"Do you think they...?" Velvet's voice trailed off. She was looking behind us, just above the door we had come through. Two automated security turrets were mounted on the wall. They had power, but didn't

seem to be tracking us. My E.F.S. claimed they were not a threat. The room suggested that had not always been the case.

I looked up towards the circular window of the Overmare's office, only there wasn't one. The wall was blank and featureless where that window should be. The stairwell that should lead up to the security center and Overmare's offices was there, but it was simply labeled: Security.

I found myself getting irrationally upset at the incorrectness of the Stable's design. Again.

Behind me, I heard Calamity whispering to Velvet, "She's had bad reactions to a Stable before." What, was I that obvious? "We better keep an eye on her."

Oh perfect. Now they were going to be my parents. Arrugh. "Okay, there doesn't seem to be any immediate danger. We should split up to save time. Velvet, why don't you raid the clinic." It was safe. I could see into the clinic through the Atrium window. Calamity and I will head down to maintenance."

Velvet Remedy argued, "No, Calamity should stay with me."

I barely kept myself from stomping.

Velvet Remedy continued simply, "I want to mend that leg as soon as possible. I can use my magic to heal the bone once I have it set properly."

Fine, I groused mentally. Then, sounding as pleasant as I could, "Of course. No problem. I don't need any help finding the PipBuck Technician stall anyway." That is, assuming any of the rest of this place isn't laid out bizarrely. "I'll be back before you're done."

I started to trot back through the door. Velvet Remedy stopped me with a soft voice. "Littlepip? Are you all right?"

I waved a hoof. "Oh yes. I'm just... feeling a little drained. Blood loss, you know." I put on a good smile. She looked like she was trying

to be convinced. “Okay, I’m a bit surprised. But I’m happy. It’s a good thing that my two friends *like* each other.”

Calamity coughed. “Wait, what?” He nickered, “She’s a self-righteous, self-idolizin’ elitist who’d rather fix up our enemies than shoot ‘em.”

Velvet Remedy shot him a scowl. “And he’s an impulsive ruffian who thinks he can fix the wasteland by drowning it in blood.”

By the Goddesses, could they be any more obvious!

I left before I screamed.



I spent the rest of the trip down through Stable Maintenance reminding myself that it actually was a good thing that my friends got along, that it was stupid to be jealous when I’d had no real chance to begin with, and that if I wanted to keep those friends, I’d best bury these feelings in that same dark hole.

I wondered just how long this had been going on. Was it new? Had there been signs that I was too oblivious to catch? Or had I just not wanted to catch them?

The idea of “catching them” brought an entirely unwanted mental image of Velvet and Calamity to mind that I quickly shredded and burned. This was going to be hard.

You know what would make being cheerful for them easy? A little pony in my head waved a tin at me. Fuck that little pony. I wanted to wallow just a little longer.

A little light appeared on my E.F.S. compass. It was not hostile. Did one of them come down here after me? If so, how did they get ahead of me?

A moment later, a maintenance bot hovered out of one of the stalls, its multiple limbs bobbing as it cleaned the wall. No wonder this place looked spotless. I felt a spark of annoyance that we didn’t have a wall-

washing robot in Stable Two Maintenance. I'd had to wash the walls of my stall by hoof.

The robot started to clean in my direction. I decided to get out of its way by ducking into the Robotics Technician stall. The room was filled with maintenance bots in various states of disrepair. There were enough tools in here to upgrade Calamity's workshop plans. I began looting.

The Robotics Technician's back office had been burned black. I found the charred skeletons of two ponies along with a partially-dismantled medical bot. From the looks of it, somepony had made a fatal error while working on it, causing the sanitary flamethrower to go off wildly.

The maintenance bot passed by in the hall.

At the back of the burned office was a safe, the paint on the wall around it bubbled and peeling. The safe itself had feared nothing from the fire. I slipped out my screwdriver and a bobbypin, only to discover the safe wasn't locked. Already in a bad mood, I felt cheated.

Inside was a flask of apple whiskey, a pouch of two-hundred-year-old (Old-Fashioned Gourmet) Honey Drops, a tin of (sadly normal) Mintals, several maintenance clipboards and a recording. Leaving the clipboards, I downloaded the recording into my PipBuck and gave it a listen.

"This is Mender, reporting on diagnostics progress for Cannikin's household utility bot. Stayed up all night probing through this thing's programming; wanted to have this report ready in time for the funeral

"From what I can tell, looks like the robot suffered a glitch while receiving an automated update to its subroutines from Stable-Tec. That's really the only explanation I have of how it gave Cannikin a cup of steaming hot industrial solvent rather than coffee.

"All those ponyfolk who whispered old Cannikin was going to drink himself to death are probably choking on their words right now. If not, they should be. I saw the poor fellow before they incinerated him -- his whole mouth and throat were eaten away. I've had nightmares about it for days.

"I plan to talk to Shadowhorn later today; I want all the house-helpers to be shut down until we can check each one of them. Of course, that's going to take some doing, and a lot of time.

"I know it's uncomely of me to use Cannikin's death to push my own agenda, but this is just another example of why I think we need an in-Stable authority. How can the ponies of Stable-Tec possibly expect to properly govern the Stable if they're not here, seeing what's going on?"

That was unexpected. And gruesome. I tried to shove the mental image of Cannikin out of my head, centering my thoughts instead on the idea of a Stable without an Overmare at all. A Stable run remotely by Stable-Tec.



The PipBuck Technician's stall was right where it was supposed to be. I was surprised, relieved, and a touch annoyed that I should feel either.

The Technician's spell matrix master key was locked away in a cabinet along with a dozen other enchanted precision tools that mere apprentices like myself were not allowed access too. I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin once more.

A few minutes later, my armored utility barding was fully-loaded with everything I could need for advanced PipBuck repair. And, at least in theory, everything necessary to restore the flow of magical power to SteelHooves' armor. And just in case, I packed several spark batteries and a small magical field conducting array.

The office of this Stable's head Technician lacked the hammock that had so often bore my teacher's weight back in Stable Two. I shook my head, giving the stall one more look before leaving to rejoin my friends. I spotted an audio journal amongst the items scattered across the Technician's desk.

Sit here and play the journal? Or trot back to find Velvet Remedy and Calamity. Together. Hopefully not kissing. Okay, journal it was.

"Shadowhorn called us into a meeting this morning. We nearly had a major disaster yesterday. That idiot Buckbright built his colt a BB gun for his birthday, then brought the kid down to the reactor level for target practice. What was he thinking? Kid missed a radroach and punched a small hole in the environmental system. Actually nicked the water talisman. Thankfully, it's working fine, but another half an inch and the whole Stable would be in serious trouble.

"As head of Maintenance, Shadowhorn laid down a whole new series of safety protocols. They aren't official until she gets them passed through Stable-Tec, but we're going to follow them anyway. If Stable-Tec doesn't like somepony giving the orders for them, well they can trot themselves down here and say differently."



Velvet Remedy pushed three jars of extra-strength restoration potion over to me. "Drink these. You'll be in perfect health in ten minutes."

I was shocked. "Shouldn't we take these with us? Use them sparingly?"

Velvet Remedy shook her head. She was looking a lot better. She had stowed away her dress and removed her bandages; her hide was perfect, her coat looked pristine and healthy. She had a couple IV bags draped over her haunches, with surgical tubing running to a spot beneath her left shoulder. "No need. I've already stored a dozen more away for our travels, plus plenty of bandages, some braces, blood packs and more. For the first time, we're positively flush with medical supplies. I'd say this clinic was a gift from the Goddesses, but I know better."

I raised an eyebrow as I floated the first potion to my lips. Velvet Remedy slid me a recording. "I found this while I was... requisitioning supplies." I smirked at her reluctance to call it looting or scavenging.

I downed two of the extra-strength restoration potions and slipped the third into my saddlebags. Memories of Velvet, her hide shredded and bloody, had resurfaced in my mind. I could handle being mostly healed if it meant I had one of these ready in case of an emergency.

Calamity was also looking much better. He complained that after Velvet Remedy's mending spell, the brace wasn't really necessary, but she insisted he keep it on for at least another day.

I walked about the clinic, looking for a good spot to sit down and listen to the recording. I frowned at it, expecting bad things. Recordings so rarely carried good things in the Equestrian Wasteland. Especially, it seemed, in Stables.

I found a chemistry lab in the back of the clinic. For a moment, all thoughts of the recording fled my mind. Looking over the drugs and supplies, I realized that along with what I had already, I had all the ingredients to cook up my own batch of Party-Time Mint-als! And having the ability and opportunity, I couldn't resist. It would have been silly to.

As I started work, I remembered why I had come back here. I let the recording play as I ground down the regular, boring old Mint-als into a fine powder.

"Oh..."

The voice was so filled with raw despair that I quickly shut the recording off. I didn't want to hear that. I concentrated on my chem cooking for several long minutes, the recording just sitting there on the counter staring balefully at me. Finally, with a huff, I turned it back on.

"How could this have happened?!"

"The doctor and I just stepped out for a few minutes. When we came back, the clinic had sealed itself and the fire suppression system had activated, flooding the entire clinic with... with..."

"It took us over an hour to get it open again. We tried breaking through the window, but it's armored. Why would they armor the window? Everypony inside had choked to death. Lemongrass had only been in there to have her stitches out. She was planning for her daughter's Cute-ceañera this evening, and had been talking to me about what flavor of cake to get from the dispensers. The Orange's new

colt was still in the clinic nursery! Oh gosh! I don't think anypony's told them yet!..."

I shut it off again. My heart was twisted up in knots. Part of me wanted to cry. Part wanted to rage at something. But there wasn't anything obvious to rage at. So I raged at the faucet, beating my hooves against it for refusing to give me water. It was stupid, but it felt good. Finally (after pouring water from my canteen), I finished mixing the concoction and set it to bake.

The sound of machine gun fire snapped my attention away. All thought of journals, Mint-als and chemistry evaporated when I heard Velvet Remedy cry out. My friends were in trouble!

As I turned, two red spots lit up on my E.F.S. compass. The turrets had become hostile. Dashing back into the central clinic, I saw Calamity and Velvet ducking under an overturned medical bench as the two turrets outside (above the now-closed door) peppered the glass window. Pock-marks and spiderweb cracks covered every inch of it, the armored glass about to give.

Floating out Little Macintosh, I positioned myself where I would be able to target both of them the instant the glass came down. I didn't have much cover, but if I was fast and just a little lucky, I wouldn't need it.

The window broke apart in a tinkling cascade. I felt the first bullet slam into my chest, not quite punching through my armor, as I girded myself with S.A.T.S. and targeted both turrets twice. A second bullet ripped through my foreleg between my PipBuck and my knee as I fired off the first shot. And the second.

BLAM! BLAM!

The first turret exploded. The second swept its arc of bullets away from Calamity and Velvet Remedy and towards me.

BLAM! BLAM!

One last bullet struck my side, bouncing off the handle of my combat shotgun with a loud crack, as the second turret exploded.

I collapsed, suddenly realizing that I was yet again in a truly bad amount of pain. But this time I had no worries at all. I had Calamity and Velvet Remedy right nearby, and we were in a clinic. If I had to be shot, I couldn't think of a better place or better company.

But as soon as I hit the floor, I struggled back to my hooves, ignoring my injuries. Limping, bleeding badly, I tried to push back towards the chemistry lab. I had to make sure my Party-Time Mint-als didn't overcook. Now that my friends were safe, my mind locked on what had become a decidedly second but still important priority.



The Atrium door had closed and locked. We were sealed inside.

It was more of an aggravation than a real worry. I knew that I should be able to override every door in this place from the Security station. But reaching it meant getting past several more points where the suddenly trigger-happy security system could attack us.

I looked to my companions. By now, I was beginning to think of us as seasoned warriors of the wasteland (well, at least Calamity and I). I hadn't been out here long, but the time had been a forging fire if there ever was one. A few turrets shouldn't pose much threat to the slayers of dragons.

I quickly checked myself. That kind of thought was dangerous. The last thing I needed was to start buying into the hype on the radio.

Velvet Remedy was looking at me sadly. I think I was fast enough, but I was guessing that she suspected what I was up to in the chemistry lab. She hadn't taken her eyes off me since, and the reproachful look was burning into my soul.

Calamity was gazing over something on the wall. At first, I assumed it was another pre-war poster -- he was studying it with the same intensity that Velvet Remedy usually reserved for anything involving the Ministry of Peace. But as I moved closer, still slightly limping on my own mended and bandaged leg, I saw that it was a map of the

Stable. My eyes followed the path up the stairs to the Security station. The armory was up there, as well as a series of rooms that in a proper Stable would have been the Overseer's personal and family quarters. Here, it was labeled as V.I.P. (Very Important Ponies) rooms. There was a big area of absolutely nothing where the Overseer's Office was supposed to be.

My brow furrowed. "I really hate these Stables."

Velvet Remedy was looking back over the skeletons, while keeping me within her line of sight. "Was... was the other one you found this bad?"

"Worse," neighed Calamity.

We moved towards the stairs, stopping at a bulletin board covered in the usual notices. I shrank back; somepony had written "STOP KILLING US!" across the board in what looked like blood.

"Oh my," Velvet whispered. To my surprise, she magically tugged one of the notices off the board, floating it closer for inspection. The notice had been between a posting of new safety regulations and a flier for two missing fillies whose smiling faces had stared into an atrium of corpses for centuries. The bottom part of the "N" was painted on the sheet Velvet had taken. I stared from the bulletin board to her, wondering how by Luna's Mane she could find anything more noteworthy than the giant plea for mercy written in a dying pony's own bodily fluids.

Velvet Remedy turned the flyer so that Calamity and I could see.

Third Month Survival Party!

Tonight in the Atrium!

10 o'clock to 16 o'clock

Stable 29's own Vinyl Scratch hosting

(alcohol will be provided after twelve)

Calamity whistled, tilting up his hat. "Vinyl Scratch. The original DJ Pon3... least accordin' t' some. So, she survived the Manehattan balefire bomb after all."

I shot Calamity a look that suggested he needed to revisit his definition of “survived”.

I really hated these Stables.



Between stealth and Little Macintosh, the other turrets proved little threat. I reloaded as we pushed into the Security station. I sat down to hack the terminal, trying to be respectful as I floated the pony skeleton off of it and laid it down in the corner near the others. Velvet Remedy had begun saying prayers over them.

Calamity trotted to the armory in the vain hope he could open it without my skills. Discovering he couldn't, he turned away with a disappointed expression. I waited until he took a step away before opening the door remotely from the easily-hacked terminal. He jumped, then shot me a grin and disappeared inside. A petty but good-natured revenge; I was still smelling carrots.

I turned back to see a huge mass of security logs. Tentatively, I brought up one of the later ones.

Entry 67:

This is insane!

Over half the population is dead. At first, we thought they were freak accidents, but now it's clearly malevolent. It's like the Stable itself has turned against us! Yesterday, the school sealed itself and plasma was vented into the room. Twenty-three colts and fillies were murdered horribly, their bodies literally melting away! We could hear their screams! My nephew was in the class. He'd just gotten his cutie mark; he was going to grow up to be an artist!

My sister can't stop crying. She's locked herself in our room with all the pictures she has of him. Somepony has to be responsible for this. Somepony has to pay!

I found myself shaking, and not from pain. I commanded the security terminal to play one of the older ones.

Entry 43:

Shadowhorn passed away last night from complications after being nearly electrocuted early yesterday morning while trying to access the junction behind a security panel with her PipBuck. This, so soon after Buckbright and his son were killed in that accident with the lift! This Stable's a death trap.

I hit another.

Entry 72:

It's Stable-Tec. It has to be! Those fuckers at Stable-Tec have locked us all in their little fucking death maze and are killing us off. It's not even one-by-one anymore. They're slaughtering us in groups!

What kind of sadistic bastards could do this!? They've killed children!

Don't they realize we're the only chance for ponykind? These Stables are supposed to save us! What kind of evil saddlefuckers play murder games with the last surviving members of their own species?

We can't even get at them. It's all done remotely.

I brought up the next one, ignoring Velvet Remedy's plea for me to stop.

Entry 73:

Ha. Ha. The jokes on us, isn't it? It occurs to me that we don't actually know that the megaspells went off. We believe the world above has been destroyed because that's what Stable-Tec told us to believe. But what if it's not? All of Equestria is just going on about their daily lives in the sunny world above us while we scream and cry and die down here in some depraved amusement for the sick, soulless ponies at Stable-Tec.

It's the only thing that makes even a breath of sense in this horror.

I reached to trigger another when Velvet Remedy physically pulled me away from the terminal.

"WHAT!?" I yelled in pure rage, my body shaking so hard I felt like I would explode.

"Littlepip," she said, and I realized she was crying, "You need to stop."



Calamity and Velvet Remedy sent me off to look over the last two rooms, the V.I.P. rooms, while they turned off the security systems and opened all the doors. That was good. They wanted me to catch my breath. Calm down. I wanted to find a place away from them and something to violently destroy.

I was seeing red like never before, and I couldn't even attack the source of my anger because they were all dead. Dead decades and centuries ago. My body hadn't stopped shaking.

The first room had a banner lit up above it: Vinyl Scratch. This was her room then. The original DJ Pon3. I stepped forward and the door slid open.

The room inside had been untouched since the night of the party, three months after the door of Stable Twenty-Nine closed, trapping everypony inside.

I walked about, staring. Stacks of records. Turntables. Recording equipment. A rather luxurious if small space to eat and sleep. A private lavatory with a full-body bath.

I could throw quite the rage in here. The records would shatter beneath my hooves quite enjoyably. But I couldn't do that. Destroying the things that had been loved by the ponies who lived here (ever so briefly) didn't feel like railing against the vile ponies that had created this place; rather, it would be a continuation of their work. Instead, I collected a few records, slipping them into my saddlebags. When I returned to the others, I would have Velvet

Remedy lock them in one of her medical boxes where it would be safe from bullet fire. I still remembered that apple.

There was a safe in the room. I hesitated. Somehow, it felt a little odd breaking into the safe of a celebrity, even a long-dead one. But with a long breath, I brought out my tools and set to work. Inside I found an old child's toy, several framed photographs and a handful of posters. And one box that looked like it had been rescued from a fire. Inside were four memory orbs. One caught my eye. It was labeled: Pinkie Pie's Last Party. I took it, slipping it into my saddlebags and walked to the next room.

The sign over the door announced: Shadowhorn.

The mare in charge of maintenance was a V.I.P. in the Stable? Even in the midst of my barely-reined fury at Stable-Tec, my pure hatred towards whom could not be told, part of my brain recognized that seemed odd.

The door slid open for me and I stepped in. This room was more disheveled. There were parts and scrap metal everywhere. Half-finished projects covered the table. Schematics of different Stable systems were pinned to the wall. One of them had been torn away to reveal this room's safe. Once again, I set to work. When the safe opened, it revealed another recording. This one looked startlingly similar to the one I found in the Overstallion's office.

I needed to hear it. But part of my mind screamed for me not to. I didn't pay attention to that voice. Instead, I played the message, and another familiar voice burst to life in the tomb of Stable Twenty-Nine. The voice sounded determined but weary and filled with sadness. She sounded like she was reading a script that she had grown to hate.

"Hello, Shadowhorn! The following is for your ears only. I am speaking to you because you have been selected for a very important job, due to your sense of loyalty and duty both to this company and the ponies around you.

"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me... oh who cares. I'm sick of these things...

"...try that again...

"Hello, my name is Scootaloo, and I'm the vice-president of Stable-Tec. If you're hearing this, that means that the Omega-Level Threat Protocols have been enacted and the citizens of Equestria chosen for Stable Twenty-Nine have been safely sealed inside the most state-of-the-art apocalypse-survival facility ever created.

"I'm very sorry. I wish there was more we could do.

"Hell, I wish this whole thing could have been prevented...

"...But instead, it falls to us to save who we can, and try to prevent it from happening ever again. To that end, your Stable has been selected to participate in a vital social project. The first goal of Stable Twenty-Nine, like any other, is to save the lives of the ponies inside. But...

"...but there is a higher purpose to your Stable, beyond saving individual ponies. We here at Stable-Tec understand that it doesn't do ponykind any good to save ourselves now only to annihilate each other later. We must figure out where we went wrong. We must find a better way. And we must be ready to implement it as soon as possible once the Stable doors open. And survive what our current leaders have managed to do to Equestria...

"...dammit. How did we come to this? Dammit, dammit, dammit!...

"We... I guess we came to this... maybe... because we're ponies. We try our best. We have the best intentions. But when things go wrong, we get flustered or confused. Or upset. Or angry. Our ability to make smart decisions is impaired the most when we need it the most.

"Bad decisions, emotional decisions... they've dragged us into a war nopony wanted. They've pushed us to the brink of extinction... and if you're listening to this...

"...beyond.

"...dammit all to hell. Damn us all to hell.

"...

"Sorry. I hate this whole thing. I wish the world was the way it was back when I was a filly. But wishes are just wishes.

"...dammit, I can't seem to get through one of these without going wildly off-track. I'm sure you're wondering what, if anything, does this have to do with you? Why am I telling you this? Don't worry, there's actually a point; this isn't just the rantings of some Stable-Tec pony who has... already died... haven't I?

"...

"Your Stable has a very exceptional design. Despite the official documents, this Stable has no remote connection to Stable-Tec whatsoever. Instead, replacing the normal Overmare position, we have fitted Stable Twenty-Nine with a Crusader-class computer system.

"The Crusader-class Maneframe is the most advanced supercomputer ever created by ponykind, using the greatest available improvements in arcano-technology. The Crusader is capable of independent thought, creativity and learning. We've only built three of these, and the other two are currently in the possession of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences and the Ministry of Awesome respectively.

"The goal of this social experiment is to remove the emotional, fallible pony from the equation. To see if we can do better through a pragmatic and logical system of government that is not subject to our own faults.

"As always, just in case something goes wrong, there is a backup. And that backup is you. Provided with this recording are the codes to shut down the Crusader Maneframe in case of emergency. Doing so will unfortunately also shut down all the automated systems, so this should only be done in a matter of life and death for the general population of the Stable. There is an access junction between the Security station and the V.I.P. rooms through which you can access the Crusader Maneframe.

"As a last resort, the programming of the Crusader Maneframe can also be entirely overwritten via magically transfer-mapping the brain of a pony into the Maneframe itself. This would allow you to effectively become the Crusader, taking control of the automated systems yourself. However, this is

untested and the effects on the pony initiating this transfer are unknown, so I really, really don't suggest it.

"In any other circumstances, however, it is crucial that you keep to the ruse, as per the directives provided.

"Thank you. From all of us. From all of Equestria. Best of luck, and may Stable Twenty-Nine and all its ponies live long and well."



Finding the security access junction was easy. I was replaying the message again, this time in my earbloom. It made no sense. But it had the singular benefit of not being overwhelmingly evil. I had to know more.

Pulling away the security panel, I found a maze of tubes and wiring. And set into it, a small yellow-orange box with a black jackpoint. It struck me that the last pony to try this was effectively electrocuted. Hooking my own PipBuck into the junction could be a death sentence. Fortunately, I had another option.

I pulled out Velvet Remedy's PipBuck for the first time since shortly after I found her. It was a thing of beauty, but I realized it had a less pleasant meaning to her. Holding it by levitation only, I jacked her custom PipBuck into the junction.

Minutes later, I was looking through streams of data. One string caught my eye:

```
> Error Detected:
> Water Talisman functioning at 98% capacity
> Analyzing Damage
> Chance of restoring Water Talisman to full functionality:
0%
> Analyzing Options
> Surface Radiation level 1300% above survivable level
> Preservation of Pony Life requires water rationing and
0.02% reduction of Stable population
```

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">> Initiating water rationing> Analyzing population for most expendable 0.02%> Initiating population reduction |
|---|

The strength went out of me. I stared at what I was reading, my rage melting into cold despair. There were many more strings of similar data. Over the course of a season, the damaged water talisman continued to deteriorate, and every time the degradation reached a new threshold, the Crusader running Stable Twenty-Nine culled a portion of the population in a coldly calculated attempt to preserve “Pony Life” in the Stable as a whole.

After three months, the water talisman failed altogether. The Crusader acted accordingly. To preserve Pony Life.



I poured what was left of a bottle of apple whiskey down my throat, enjoying the burn. The rage had drained from me, replaced by a numbness that was even worse.

I decided to escape this horrible place through the memory orb, at least for a little while. Setting it down gently, I focused my magic on the orb.

Instantly, I was overwhelmed by bright flashes, a horrible thudding roar and gut-wrenching nausea. The memory orb had decayed somehow, and I was trapped inside a nightmare of sensory feedback and vertigo. I tried to escape, but there was no way out.

Then the world righted itself. But it wasn't my world. I was quite certain I had vomited all over myself, but I wasn't myself, so I couldn't tell.



All around me spanned a massive party. Colored lights, festive decoration, and a dance beat that grasped hold of your soul and made

you want to move. I was at the turntables, bobbing my head to the beat. And everywhere, ponies. Ponies dancing, ponies eating, ponies doing things in corners and behind potted plants that would make their parents blush and faint.

A gracefully aging, light blue pegasus pony with rainbow-colored hair fluttered towards the turntables with a slight swagger and looking a bit sloshed.

“Awesome beat, Vinyl Scratch!” she grinned, “Your rhythms always makes for the best parties!” She wore her years well, and must have been a damn cutie in her youth. I wanted her hair!

And, whoa, was Vinyl Scratch checking her out? She had my gaze going up and down... No, wait, that’s just headbobbing.

“Yeah,” said a familiar looking orange pony with a cowpony hat on her yellow mane, and red ribbons in her tail that matched her three-apple cutie mark. She was significantly older than her statuette portrayed; she looked even older than in the news article, and had not aged quite so gracefully. I wondered if her looks were more from stress than years. “Fluttershy an’ Rarity are gonna be hatin’ they missed this.”

Her accent reminded me a lot of Calamity.

The orange earth pony sauntered up to the turntables, looking at the blue pegasus who swayed slightly as she smiled back. “Are ya safe t’ fly home, Rainbow?”

“Aw hell no!” the rainbow-maned pegasus clopped the orange one on the shoulder. “I haven’t left one of Pinkie Pie’s parties safe to fly in... nearly twenty years now!”

The orange pony gave her an odd look. “Ya ain’t tried any of the... harder stuff... ‘ave you?”

“Hell no,” Rainbow stomped a hoof as she repeated herself. “You know...” She dropped her voice, which had been getting loud, “...I don’t touch any of that stuff.” She held a hoof to her breast with slightly wobbly pride. “Rainbow Dash doesn’t need enhancements!”

The orange pony looked relieved. I realized I was looking at the mysterious mare of the Ministry of Awesome, the one whose rebellion gave Calamity his title of Dashite. I didn't know what to think; although I had to admit, she certainly had the right hair.

"I heard they've got stuff back there called *dash!*" Rainbow Dash said conspiratorially. "Which Pinkie says would make me even *faster*." She landed with a heroic stance, her voice filling with extra bravado. "Of course I don't do that stuff, AJ. Dash on dash? That wouldn't just break the laws of Equestria. That would break the laws of *physics!*"

An apple-green coated stallion trotted up and whispered something in the ear of the orange pony (apparently named AJ). Rainbow Dash stopped with a stare. "Sooooo AJ, who's the new buck?"

"Ya don't have t' ask it like that," AJ bristled.

"Aw, if you wanted some company," Rainbow Dash clopped the orange pony on her cutie mark, "You could have just asked me."

The earth pony fixed Rainbow Dash with a look. "My barn door don't swing that way." Something stirred in me. "An' neither does yours." The stirring died. "Yer drunk," the orange pony added unnecessarily but accurately, stepping out of the way of a green mare whose plate was loaded with cakes.

Rainbow Dash just giggled. "So, are you gonna introduce your new buckfriend or not?"

AJ rolled her eyes before introducing him. "This here's Sergeant 'SteelHooves' Applesnack. Served with Big Macintosh. Apples, dear, this is Rainbow Dash, the old friend Ah war... told ya about."

No way.

"No way!" Rainbow Dash echoed my thoughts. Then proceeded to derail them. "You're dating a buck named Applesnack?" The pegasus, who had just begun to fly again, collapsed onto the floor, rolling in laughter.

The elderly orange earth pony rolled her eyes. Not looking at her laughing companion, she nickered, "Don't hurt yerself." Somewhere else in the room, an argument had broken out.

"*Applejack* and *Applesnack*!" Rainbow Dash tried to get up again, but broke down in a fresh wave of laughter. "Oh it hurts too much!"

I was thinking that his title had to be a coincidence. I'd know for sure from his voice, but so far he hadn't said anything. He was watching his date's old friend with a gracious wry amusement.

My sight was torn away from the two as Vinyl Scratch looked up to the balcony, where the argument I'd barely noticed earlier was beginning to draw everypony's attention. I immediately recognized Pinkie Pie, although the purple unicorn who was trotting determinedly away from her was not familiar.

"Not this again," said Pinkie Pie, bouncing after her. "You wouldn't expect me to bake a cupcake without tasting it to make sure it's goooood would you?"

"I'm leaving," she said. "I shouldn't have come." She was barely audible through the clamor of the party.

Pinkie Pie's voice however could somehow be heard clearly over the intense rock music. "Oh, don't be like that, Twilight! It's a *paaaaar-tee!* Have *fun!*"

The unicorn glared forward, ignoring her until the surprisingly bouncy pony dropped herself right in front of the purple unicorn. "Have fun! Have fun! Have fun! Have fun!" She sang it like a mantra.

The unicorn stopped, one forehoof off the ground, and stared. She seemed to struggle with an inner urge. For a moment, events could have gone either way. But then she stomped the hoof down.

"I'm *not* having fun, Pinkie Pie," she said, her voice dangerous and loud. "And do you want to know a secret? Neither. Are. *You!*"

Pinkie Pie giggled. “Of course I’m having fun! There’s cake and ice cream and cupcakes and the best party music and drinks and party favors and...”

“And these?” The unicorn floated a tin off a nearby table. I knew immediately what they were.

“Yep! Especially those!” The pink pony was nearly beaming. I heard Applejack groan next to me.

Twilight opened the tin. Then turned it over, spilling Party-Time Mint-als all over the floor. Some bounced over the side of the balcony, some down the stairs. The pink pony gasped and jumped for them, scooping them up. Part of me wanted to join her, but I was just along for the ride.

“I’m sick of lying for you,” Twilight scolded loudly. “For covering for you with the Princess. Everypony is. And I’m not going to do it anymore.”

Pinkie looked up with a glare as she picked up her Party-Time Mint-als. “You didn’t have to do that, you witchy-twitchy-rhymes-with-itchy.”

“You’re not a party pony anymore, Pinkie; you’re just an addict. Like half the ponies at your parties.” The purple unicorn stared at the pink pony, unleashing a level of mad that had clearly been building up for some time. “Well this is it. I want my old friend back. I want *my* Pinkie Pie. *You* are not *her*. But if you should happen to find her, have her give me a call.”

The song ended. The beat stopped. The whole room fell into silence.

“Twi...”

“No, don’t ‘Twi’ me. It won’t work this time. Either *clean* up and *fess* up...” The unicorn took a deep breath clenching her own eyes against what she was about to say.

“...or *this friendship is over!*”

Twilight turned and walked away. The pink pony seemed to deflate. Even her hair fell limp.

Beside me, Applejack moaned again. “Oh gosh, Twi.”

Rainbow Dash, who had long stopped laughing, flapped her wings. “She’s kinda right.” And then the blue pegasus slowly flew towards the exit. She still beat Twilight out the door.

Twilight turned back, looking not quite at Pinkie Pie. In a voice I’m not sure reached the balcony, she said, “If you decide to be my Pinkie Pie again... really do... and need help, you know where to call.” Then she walked out the door into what looked like a rainy Manehattan night. It swung shut behind her.



One thought hit me as I collapsed from the memory like I had been kicked in the stomach. (I had, in fact, vomited on myself.)

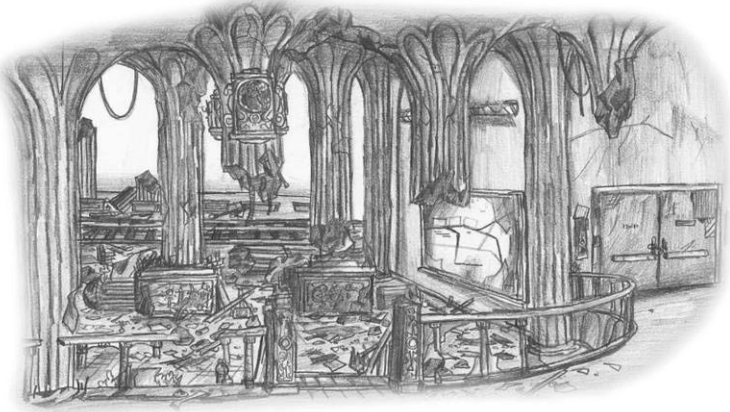
Leaning against the wall, I assured myself, “I’m not that bad...”

“But I have to be careful with you,” I said to the Party-Time Mint-als in my saddlebags. “I can’t let Calamity or Velvet Remedy get to thinking I have a problem with you. I don’t want to lose my friends because *they* think I’m addicted.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough Hide (level one) - The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have hardened you. You gain +3 to Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



WHISPERS IN THE DARKNESS

"Psst! Pinkie Pie, are you asleep yet?"

Rest.

Sleep came in fits and starts. I seriously, desperately needed rest, but every time I closed my eyes, fevered dreams of wasteland horrors dashed themselves against my mind's eye.

I saw ponies loading into a passenger (*Sky Bandit Stages*) wagon. In my mind, they were families on their way to a day of laughter and fun at a Ministry of Morale amusement park -- parents smiling warmly as their colts and fillies pranced in place with anticipation. (I don't know why, but I was certain that MoM had built amusement parks, and that they had been regularly packed full of screaming kids.) I saw mothers urging their colts not to climb on the seats, fathers checking to make sure their cameras had film. And a great wall of green flame with a sinister rainbow sheen rushing towards them that somehow nopony could see.

I saw a pony named Trixie leaving a message on the door to her cottage, grinning as she assured herself that her whole life was about to change. I saw her walking away from that door (which in the dream I

had somehow become) even as I called out to her to come back, knowing that if she left, she would never live to see her little cottage again. I called, pleaded, cried. But she could not hear me and walked away.

I saw ponies giving their loved ones the great news that they had been selected for a Stable. I watched as they -- bright and colorful and living ponies -- trotted into their new home, the clock on the wall above them counting down the minutes until an accident would doom them all to horror and death.

I awoke with a fit.

I was laying... somewhere. A bed. But every time I tried to remember exactly where I was, or how I got there, the memories slipped away. I opened my eyes. The room was dark, but light poured in through a cracked-open door. I didn't recognize the walls with their shadowed posters or the roof with its still and silent turret.

My body felt wrong. I ached, I felt horribly weak. I had chills when I wasn't sweating profusely. My stomach churned. My mouth tasted strange and mushy.

Shadows trotted near the door. I heard Calamity's voice. "Do ya think she went an' picked up somethin' in the Stable?"

Velvet Remedy's voice, soft and clear, responded, "Or it could be brought on by stress. I'm worried about her. I think the wasteland is getting to her."

"Y'all seem t' be doin' well," Calamity observed, his voice low so as not to wake me.

Velvet gave a wry (yet very feminine) laugh. "Not as well as you think, my noble outsider." Was that sarcasm? Or affection? I couldn't tell, and trying to think about it made my thoughts swim. "And I *should* do better than Littlepip; I'm over a decade more mature than she is."

Great. I'm a child to her. Beautiful. I'm a fucking filly. The same filly as the first time we met at some older filly's Cute-ceañera. My life just couldn't get any better.

“And all those drugs she’s been taking... they’re certainly not helping.”

My stomach convulsed violently. I wanted to cry. My eyelids were too heavy to look around anymore, and I didn’t fight them as they closed on their own. I turned away from the slice of light coming through the door, falling again into fitful sleep.



“Are ya gonna stay in here with ‘er all night?”

Calamity’s voice was a whisper, very close to my bed. I wasn’t entirely sure that I was awake, much less at which point the tides of dreaming had deposited me on the shore of awareness. I vaguely recalled a change in the darkness, a fluctuation of light, perhaps the opening of a door.

“At least until her fever breaks,” the whisper of Velvet Remedy’s voice sounded from near my head. My ears twitched.

“She awake?”

“She’s been in and out. She’ll sleep better once the fever’s broken.”

Wonderful. My body felt alien to me. My mind was a horrible, shifting haze. I said a silent prayer to Celestia, begging her to take my sickness from me and cast it to the moon.

“Ah’m more worried about you,” Calamity said. “And not just ‘cause ya need t’ sleep too.”

Celestia, do you hate me? My sickness and misery was giving them time to *bond*. My mind started tormenting me with images of how they might be spending their time together now that I was effectively out of the picture.

“Oh?” My fevered brain insisted that she sounded pleased as well as oddly condescending.

“Yer shield spell ain’t anywhere near as strong as them...” Calamity paused. “...Alicorns, Ah guess we’re callin’ ‘em now.” Was that

disgust in Calamity's voice? No, not disgust. But something else. Something unpleasant, as if the word didn't taste good.

"Your point?"

"If ya gonna be makin' a habit o' usin' yer body t' shield other ponies, ya need t' start wearin' armor," Calamity insisted. Yay Calamity. I was going to tell her that too. Just... never quite had the chance...

My head was feeling heavy. Just listening seemed to take effort. My body was too hot, the blanket drenched in sweat, but my limbs were too heavy to move. Sleep was creeping up on me like a manticore ready to pounce, wanting to drag me off into nightmares again.

"...won't get me into anything worn by one of those nasty raiders," Velvet was saying. I realized I'd missed part of the conversation.

"Wouldn't want ya to. Slaver armor neither. Bad idea. Ask Li'lpip when she's up an about," Calamity whispered firmly. "But when we get t' Tenpony, we gonna buy ya some proper duds fer the Equestrian Wasteland."

My despondency evaporated at those words. A strange sense of relief, twisted by illness, washed over me. Part of me, I realized, had been afraid that they would leave me.

I felt doomed to wander until either I found my place in this hellish outside, or... or I fixed it. At least, as much as I could. I supposed I was searching for my virtue, as Watcher had suggested, like a filly trying to invoke her cutie mark. But Calamity and Velvet Remedy were not burdened by my quest, or my sense of being utterly lost. Why wouldn't they leave me to it on my own once they had found some place to stay? Tenpony Tower, for instance. Why *shouldn't* they?

To hear them speaking of getting Velvet Remedy armor (something I firmly agreed with Calamity that she needed, even though I couldn't picture my elegant idol wearing anything other than classy dresses) -- to know they were planning for a future wandering the Equestrian Wasteland, presumably with me -- filled my heart with assurance and hope.

But despite the warmth of these feelings, as I drifted back to sleep, my mind began to venture again down dark paths. I found myself wondering what, if anything, could have been done to save all the ponies of Stable Twenty-Nine. With exposure to the surface fatal and their water talisman dying, all I could see was hundreds of ponies trapped in a sarcophagus under the ground. Already buried, waiting to die.

They did not, my mind insisted, need to die with such violence and horror. But the only way I could think of to save even one of them...

No, that would have been too abhorrent to consider.

...the only way to save even one would have been to make sure the strain on the water talisman was so minimal that its deterioration would have taken several decades. Something that could only have been done if, instead of initially reducing the population by that minimal 0.02%...

I cringed away from myself, revolted that I could even think such a thing.

I awoke again hours later with a silent gasp, drenched and chilled with a cold that sank into my soul. My sense of what I had been dreaming collapsed into a dark pit that was swiftly sealed by wakefulness. Only a few shreds of memory remained; I was fairly certain it had something to do with the Ponyville Library, dead cats and being burned alive by a dragon.

I found a canteen had been hung by the side of the bed. I drank greedily from it and then fell back into the horrors of sleep.



"No! Don't go! I'm trapped!"

I cried out, my hind legs crushed under a fallen wall, but Velvet Remedy and Calamity just walked away.

"Please... Don't leave me here!"

Velvet Remedy leaned her head against Calamity's mane and nuzzled. The ground was stretching between us. They were barely walking, but they were getting further away. The clouds were boiling down, becoming fog, surrounding and obscuring them as my heart threatened to seize. I knew that when they disappeared, I would die...

I awoke crying and beat a hoof against my pillow.

Despair tainted my hope, like a cupcake with ashes mixed into the batter. They were staying with me, but I was losing them to each other.

My ears perked. There were no voices. *Oh Luna... I was alone! They'd left me!* I still felt trapped. My head jerked up, looking around frantically. Grey daylight seeping between heavy curtains (were they armored mesh?) raised the ambient illumination in the room. Something heavy pressed against my side. Turning, I found Velvet Remedy asleep, her head having fallen onto the bed beside me, pinning me under the blankets.

Relief was like a flood of painkiller, numbing the irrational fears of my night terrors which clung to me like leeches. I was happy for Velvet and Calamity. No, I really was! I was just... lonely.

Lonely, and...

Frustrated.

I looked away from Velvet and found myself staring at a huge wall poster, garishly pink, advertising the Fillydelphia Funfarm Amusement Park. ("Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been," endorses Pinkie Pie, "Every day, forever!") Well, now I knew where that notion had come from.

On the opposite wall was another copy of the recruitment poster. ("You too can be a Steel Ranger!") I realized where I must be. Lifting my PipBuck, I checked the automap. SteelHooves Shack. I collapsed back onto the bed, feeling unbearably exhausted, physically and mentally.

And, even worse, I felt horny. Which was not a sensation that mixed well with illness. Maybe it was having Velvet Remedy so close, her

head pressing against my flank as she slept partially on my bed. My stomach twisted in warning. I didn't care.

I was too hot, too sick. But still, as I lay back, I tried to summon up daydreams that would relieve at least one of my symptoms, my hooves beneath my blankets. I turned to face away from Velvet Remedy in shame.

I contemplated Candi, but her face and features were already faded in my mind (and the ending of my relationship with New Appleloosa would sour any fantasy). I considered the rainbow-maned mare from the memory orb. But no matter how well she had aged, she was still older than I wanted to fantasize about. And even if I pictured her younger, the link between her and Calamity would just make it... weird. Finally, I settled on daydreaming about the mare from one of my statuettes, the breathtakingly alluring white unicorn pony with her dreamy purple mane and tail.

I enjoyed that as much as my sickness-addled body would allow... for maybe half an hour. Then, like a splash of cold water, I realized the mare I was fantasizing about was Velvet Remedy's great, great, something-or-other grand-aunt. That murdered my fantasy, and danced cruelly on its corpse. The weight of Velvet Remedy's head was suddenly more present than before. I could feel the warmth radiating from her, and my stomach knotted with guilt.

Suddenly, I felt a heaving inside me, and the taste of bile. Pushing to the edge of the bed, I vomited into the crevasse between the bed and the wall.

Still retching, my mouth foul and burning, my eyes shedding tears, I heard Velvet Remedy stir awake. My fall was complete. Now, instead of being a child in her eyes, I'd be vomitpony. I had no chance of stealing her away from Calamity now... not that I ever did. (Or ever would! I'm not that kind of jealous, selfish pony. But... just saying... if I was that kind of pony, this would be the final nail in the coffin of any chance I had.) I felt Velvet's weight lift from the bed as she pulled back from me.

“Oh... Littlepip, are you okay?” What a stupid question. Yet I nodded, my head pressed against the wall. “Let me get you some water...”

I waited for her to go, crying just a little against the wall, my coat matted in sweat, my head burning against the wall.

“Goddess, I’m pathetic.”

Velvet Remedy returned to give me water, to clean the wall and floor of my vomit, to bathe me and replace the sheets on my bed. I was in no state to enjoy any of it. But I could properly marvel that she took the time on somepony like me.



My fever finally broke sometime that evening, and I finally slipped into a restorative, dreamless sleep.

I awoke feeling like I hadn’t felt in days: sane.

My body was weak but not feeble, and I was warm and thankfully rested. My mouth tasted pasty, but my stomach was settled. And I found I was quite thirsty.

I rolled over in the bed, wondering how long I had been half-delirious, and spotted Velvet Remedy curled up on the floor fast asleep. My heart went out to her, recognizing how much I owed the older unicorn. Her head rested on an old jacket, and somepony had pulled a blanket over her while she slept. I was sure it was Calamity, and I was pleased.

As I floated the canteen from the bedpost, the deep, resonating voice of SteelHooves carried in from the other room. “Sorry, but I just don’t buy it.”

“Ah don’t get ya,” I heard Calamity respond. There was something in the tone of both ponies that caught my attention. My ears perked, and I drank quietly as I listened.

“Your group is like the beginning of a bad joke,” SteelHooves elaborated. “A covert agent, a princess descended from pre-war

aristocracy and an outcast from an advanced civilization trot into a saloon and try to tell ponies that they're completely normal."

I nearly choked. Swiftly and without a sound, I plugged the canteen and rehung it on the bed.

"Y'think we're lyin'?" Thank you, Calamity, for sounding offended.

"I think either you're lying to me, or they're lying to you."

I heard a stomp I assumed was from Calamity. "What makes ya think...?"

"Because I was conscious, if barely. I saw all of us down for the count. That alicorn was at full strength, unimpaired, her magical shield shrugging off grenades. Then, a moment later, she was dead," the low voice gave a grave accounting of our meeting battle like a schoolteacher reading test scores. "A single bullet hole, right through the brain. You want me to believe some innocent young mare just weeks out of a Stable did that? Do *you* even believe that?"

I didn't like how quiet Calamity was before saying, "Yeah, Ah do. Cuz that's what happened."

"An innocent young mare," SteelHooves repeated, "Just out of a Stable. With refined criminal skills that let her pick every lock and hack every computer, even when nopony else in two hundred years has managed the feat."

I frowned. I had to admit, I'd wondered about the lack of other skilled lockpickers myself. But then, I also knew that I had honed my skill in precise telekinetic lockpicking over years as part of my attempt to conjure my cutie mark. My C.A.T. proved that my natural talents were focused towards mundane and arcane sciences, and my studies as a PipBuck technician and the tools of my trade gave me the education to manipulate terminals that few outsiders would have. But most of all, I knew that I hadn't been anywhere near as good at either of these things when I left Stable Two as I had become since. I had been reading books and getting a *lot* of practice.

SteelHooves continued, "For that matter, a Stable that is still in closed operation? It's hard enough to find a Stable whose population survived." A dark cloud threatened my mind at that.

Calamity's voice was low, and perhaps a little dangerous. "Are ya suggestin' they ain't from a Stable?"

"No. I'm sure they're from a Stable." The voice was cool and even. "I just find it more believable that they are highly-trained agents on a mission... perhaps from someplace akin to a Ministry of Awesome black-ops facility... than wide-eyed tourists from a repository for civilian ponies."

What? I thought Calamity said the Ministry of Awesome didn't actually do anything.

Calamity nickered. "That's... ridiculous."

"Really?" SteelHooves asked. "She survived a train jumping off a cliff."

"Ah caught her!"

SteelHooves paused, and seemed to concede that one. "How did you meet her?"

My friend hesitated. Then, with a sad breath, "I nearly killed her."

"She'd jus' come outta Ponyville, where she'd cleared a nest o' raiders," Calamity explained. "She was covered in blood an' wearin' armor she'd scavenged from 'em, so I mistook her for a raider 'erself. Swooped outta the sky an' started shootin'." I could hear the regret in his voice.

I felt a pang in my heart for him. But I also winced at his description. Even Calamity seemed to do a double-take at how that sounded, because after a pause, he quickly followed with, "They were raiders, mind ya. Raiders ain't that hard t' kill." Then, seeming to remember the wagon crash, he amended, "If yer at least a li'l lucky. An' the terrain is on yer side."

"I see," SteelHooves deadpanned. "So she's not a secret agent death pony. She's just lucky. How about the other one?"

“Velvet Remedy? She’s...” Calamity chuckled, “She’s a civilian. She’s a medic an’ a singer. How does *that* fit into yer covert ops stable theory?”

“Any other talents?”

“Does being the most beautiful pony I’ve ever met count?” I could hear the smile in Calamity’s voice. “Other than that, no. I mean, well... she does have a freakish knack for getting’ what she want. Barterin’ Ah mean. An’ talkin’ folks into stuff, when she’s not bein’...” Calamity shut up.

Good buck, Calamity. Don’t finish that sentence.

“A direct descendant of one of the three founders of Stable-Tec. The founder who, I believe, was Stable-Tec’s face of public relations and also the sister of one of the eight most powerful figures in the pre-apocalyptic government. A descendant with skills in seduction, trade and diplomacy.” SteelHooves intoned wryly, “No, you’re right. That does sound like a civilian pony.”

I groaned inside. How the hell did SteelHooves manage to do that? *I* was beginning to doubt my story, and I’d *lived* it.

I heard Calamity sigh. I hoped it was out of exasperation. “Okay, let’s pretend, just for a minute, that my companions ‘ave been lyin’ t’ me through their teeth.” Oh no. Calamity, please don’t. We’ve been honest. I know it sounds bad when he says it like that, but...

Calamity finished, “T’ what end?”

“Well,” the deep, masculine voice rumbled, “They marched into the center of a battle between raiders and slavers, somehow got the heads of two factions to sit down in the short one’s crosshairs, and then proceeded not only to eliminate the one they didn’t like, but to kill the dragon running the show, assuring the one they wanted was in charge...”

Calamity interrupted, “Ah dare say ah had a might t’ do with that muhself.”

SteelHooves continued, undissuaded. “To me, that sounds a lot like a special unit rearranging local power structures to suit their purposes. Whatever those purposed might be.”

Goddesses damn it. Is this what ponies were thinking? And I had been chagrined by my reputation when I was supposedly just a hero. This was... insane.

At least Calamity seemed to agree with me on that. “Riiiiiight. Okay then, how about this? If Li’lpip was some sorta special black ops pony, how in tarnation could Ah ‘ave nearly killed ‘er?”

“Because underground training facilities aren’t exactly the best place to learn to fight aerial opponents. I doubt you’d be able to get the drop on her again.”

Calamity was fighting not to fall for it too, bless him. “Look, Ah’ve been with them. Y’all haven’t. Ah know they’re... surprisin’. But if ya got t’know ‘em...”

“I’d see that they’re not spies at all?” SteelHooves’ deep voice seemed on the verge of a chuckle.

“Ayep.” Thank you, Calamity.

“Not a sly, sneaky hair in their manes, then?”

“Not a one.”

“Did you know that when Littlepip sleeps, she has a cute little snore?”

I do not sn... oh *crap!*



“Come again?”

I was just finishing dressing myself, and was levitating my saddlebags into place when the pony in magically powered armor had stepped in and made his announcement.

“I will be accompanying you to Tenpony Tower. After risking yourselves to save my life, escorting you safely to your destination is the least I can do.”

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

SteelHooves, however, put his hooves down. “I insist.”

I frowned, looking about the room while I thought. The shack had three rooms, the bedroom, the main room, and a workroom in the back. Upon seeing the whole of it, I realized that SteelHooves had given me his own bed to sleep upon, and that everypony had slept on the floors save for me. It made me feel grateful and guilty.

This was not the bedroom I had spent the last several days sick in, but the main room of the shack, featuring a dinner table, rows of metal lockers, a desk with a glowing terminal, and a few scattered trophies as decorations. Above the desk was a banner: a half-apple with an inlay of three magical sparks ringed by gears, held by crescent-shaped wings and overlaid by a sword of war with a mouth-brace hilt. It was the same emblem that adorned the flank of SteelHooves battle armor, right where his cutie mark would be hidden beneath.

The Steel Rangers.

I sighed. “You'll have to ask the others,” I said, cinching my saddlebags tight. I started to strap on the holsters and slings for my weapons.

“I already spoke with them on this. They claimed you're their leader.”

What? Why? I was really the least qualified to be in charge. Because the radio kept saying so? I added that to the list of things to talk to DJ Pon3 about when we arrive to Tenpony Tower.

I looked over to Velvet Remedy, but she was laying on the floor, her mind lost in the Fluttershy memory orb.

In the back room, I could hear Calamity working on the weapons he had procured from Stable Twenty-Nine's armory. Our pockets were now filled with common, low-caliber ammo that fit none of the weapons we preferred to use, and Calamity was swapping parts and

doing repairs on small pistols and low-powered rifles meant to use those bullets. Not that we expected to use them -- only the armory's supply of shotgun shells was likely to be of service to us -- but both weapons and ammo would be valuable trade goods.

A radio in the back room played DJ Pon3's radio station. The sounds of a quartet of ponies gave way to a melody of sorrow, fear and hope and the vocals of a pleasant-sounding buck who was two hundred years dead.

♪ *"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.*

How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?

When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding

And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

Strapping my sniper rifle into place, I finally looked to SteelHooves. But my answer faded when I saw he was looking away, his gaze focused on a small picture in the corner of the room that I hadn't noticed before. The picture of an elder orange mare, her yellow mane salted with grey under her cowpony hat. He swayed slightly. I felt a gravity in the room that told me not to speak.

I did move forward for a closer look, but I already knew I had seen this mare before. Many times. Her statuette was in my saddlebags, as was the memory of her at what had been Pinkie Pie's last party. I was certain now that the memory of SteelHooves was in that orb too.

Beneath the picture was a display safe. Inside, perfectly preserved, was yet another statuette of the bucking orange pony ("Be Strong") in the glory of her youth. On top of the case was a small, silk-lined box, much like the one I had found in Vinyl Scratch's safe, within which sat a single memory orb.

SteelHooves only stirred again when the song ended, the last refrain echoing into nothingness.

"You knew her, didn't you?" I asked softly, gently.

SteelHooves turned towards me. "How could I have? She died two centuries ago."

I gazed at him, not judging, just knowing. He stood rigid against the gaze for several minutes, until finally I looked away.

DJ Pon3's voice erupted from the back room. "Got your ears up, faithful listeners? Cuz I've been talkin' and some of you ain't been listenin'. For years now, I've been reminding you that ghouls and zombies ain't the same thing. Ghouls are ponies who have had the misfortune of soaking up a major dose of magical radiation and not dying. That stuff twists and rots their bodies, but unlike zombies, their minds are still like those of any other pony, and they deserve t' be treated as such.

"Well, some of you ponies up in Tenpony Tower didn't get the message. And when Sheriff Rottingtail kept pressin' for him and his ghouls t' be allowed inside, just cuz they were sick of being hounded by manticores an' slaughtered by bloodwings, Chief Grim Star, the head of Tenpony security, responded by hiring a bunch of mercenaries to scour the tenements along the Celestia Line and wipe them all out.

"In an interview, when asked how he had managed to be such a supreme douche bag, Chief Grim Star had this to say:"

Another voice, gruff and irritated, came through the radio's speakers. "Fuck off. I did what was right by those I swore to protect."

DJ Pon3's voice returned. "Just warms the heart to know that there are ponies steadfastly defending prejudice and bigotry, doesn't it? Thank you, Chief Grim Star and may Celestia bless you with a *kiss from the sun*." The last certainly sounded like it was said through gritted teeth.

I shook my head. On the one hoof, I actually felt relief to hear a news report that wasn't about me. But on the other, I had experience with both ghoul-ponies like Ditzy Doo and actual zombie-ponies. I knew the difference. And the idea of somepony endorsing wholesale slaughter of innocent ghouls because they couldn't be bothered to discern between them made me hurt and tinged my vision with red.

The deep, masculine voice of Steelhooves nickered from within his metal helmet. “Not a fan of ghoul-supporters, I take it?”

I looked at him in confusion that bordered on several darker emotions. My disgust had clearly been evident in either my face or body language; it hadn’t occurred to me that my reaction could be easily misread as directed towards DJ Pon3 himself.

“One of the wisest, kindest ponies I’ve met in this blasted hellscape is a ghoul-pony!” I spat at him. “Her name is Ditzzy Doo, and she’s easily worth any three Steel Rangers put together. Not for fighting skills or fancy weapons, but for the quality of her character.” I stomped a forehoof hard enough to sprain it. “DJ Pon3 is right. And if you don’t get that, then you have no place traveling with us.”

SteelHooves said nothing. But began to pack.



I gazed at the leftover parts strewn across the workbench in Calamity’s wake. Now that I had all the parts to build my poisoned dart gun, I should use this opportunity to put it together. Invoking my single magical ability, I started to clear away a space while simultaneously pulling the schematics out of my saddlebags.

“Mornin’, Li’lpip.” Calamity trotted into the room. “Good t’see ya back on yer hooves.”

I smiled a little thinly, giving him a nod. The conversation from the night before still cast its shadow in my mind. I knew what Calamity and the Steel Ranger had talked about, and just how convincingly SteelHooves had woven doubts. Calamity knew I’d been eavesdropping. But neither of us had said anything.

“Looks like we got ourselves a new travelin’ companion. Least fer a li’l while,” Calamity said conversationally. “Whatcha think of ‘im?”

I shrugged. I still wasn’t sure what to make of the Steel Ranger. I’d seen the shadows of both good and bad in him, but it was too soon to do anything more than to hop, skip and jump to conclusions.

From Calamity's cautious tone, I could tell he was having doubts about SteelHooves. "Ah'll admit, we could use the firepower," he offered graciously. "Be damned useful havin' an explosive ordnance specialist like that in the saddle if we run into any more o' them... alicorns."

I nodded, having begun to worry about the next time we encountered those creatures. If my suspicions were right...

"On the other hoof," Calamity started to say, then stopped as if questioning whether his opinion was worth voicing. I turned to look at him and lifted a hoof in a wave for him to go on.

"Well, let's jus' say that the Steel Rangers ain't exactly got a reputation as champions o' the common pony."

Ah yes. Reputations. The night's conversation loomed in my mind again. My eyes looked over Calamity, taking in the distance between us. I wondered if the gap was more than just physical. My memories pulled back the sheet on an almost-forgotten dream of being trapped under a wall and watching my friends just walk away.

"Hey, Li'lpip, are you okay?" Clearly, I bore my worries like a cutie mark. I snorted at the dark humor of it: some secret spy I'd be.

Calamity clopped up next to me and put a hoof gently over my back. "Now don't ya worry. Nothin' said by that lot is gonna sow seeds o' distrust 'tween us."

I looked up at him, wide-eyed. He smiled at me. "Ah've seen yer heart, Li'lpip. Y'all genuinely want t' help folk, an' ya put yer own life at risk t' do so, even when some of 'em don't deserve it. I ain't gonna start questionin' what I know 'bout ya just cuz somepony who don't know what he's yappin' 'bout can get it twisted all up."

I could feel tears gathering in my eyes. I tossed my forelegs around the big, rust-colored pony and hugged him for all I was worth.



"You can look into it if you want."

It was the first thing SteelHooves had said to me since my outburst over an hour ago. Velvet Remedy was in the room looking over our provisions. Calamity was refilling our canteens from SteelHooves' water purifier. I had finished my packing and had been staring aimlessly; my curious gaze had eventually fallen on the memory orb sitting enthroned under the picture of Applejack, mare of the Ministry of...

I realized I didn't really know which Ministry of Luna's government Applejack had been in charge of. I just had enough clues to make a few educated guesses.

"Go ahead," SteelHooves encouraged. "It hasn't been viewed in a long, long time. Somepony else should remember."

I regarded first the Steel Ranger, then the orb. I had to wonder why any pony other than a unicorn would be keeping one, since only unicorns could access the memories stored within. It made no sense, I realized, unless that pony was keeping it so that it could be shared. Or safekeeping it -- but even safekeeping it was the just the same as throwing it away if nopony ever witnessed what was kept inside.

I nodded, respectful of what I was being offered. Then leaned forward, pointing my horn towards the sphere and touching it with my magic.

My world fell away.



I was harnessed to something.

We were standing offstage, concealed in darkness by a heavy curtain. Applejack stood next to me, staring out at the dark stone stage, the podium with microphone and speakers, the mumbling throng filling the auditorium in front of it, the huge brass MWT logo on the wall behind it.

I (or at least the pony whose memory I was riding) only had eyes for her. She looked nervous, not to mention uncomfortable in her formal business dress.

“Ah can’t do this.”

I felt myself speak, heard the words coming from my mouth, “You’ll be fine.” The voice was deep and strong, like SteelHooves’ but not nearly so gravelly.

“They hate me. Half of ‘em already been saddlesore cuz Ah started puttin’ all my hooves into the Ministry ‘stead o’ jus’ lettin’ ‘em do what they wanted. But bringin’ in Twilight’s ponies?” From her tone, that had apparently not gone over well at all.

I wrapped a foreleg around her neck (allowing me to glimpse the apple green color of my coat) and nuzzled her gently, a sensation that I found quite pleasant. “And after today, they’ll all understand it, and they’ll admire you for it.”

I (or more precisely, the pony I was “riding”) leaned close and whispered into her ear. “Now go on out there and make history. Or I’ll be forced to spank you.”

Oh goddess Celestia!

The orange pony blushed and gave her encourager a look that I would have paid almost anything to have a mare give me. “Later, loverboy.” She smiled, at least more cheerful now, and strode out before the crowd. The pony I was riding watched her stride, his eyes straying repeatedly to her flanks, taking my gaze with his. As much as I couldn’t blame him, it was making me feel distinctly uncomfortable. This was an odd memory to be sharing.

Then I noticed that she had a holster strapped to one leg, mostly hidden beneath her formal attire. The ivory handle flashed three red apples as she walked.

The reception was not the respectful and admiring silence which Fluttershy received. But Applejack stood up straight at the podium, cleared her throat, and spoke slowly and clearly.

“Now listen up. Ah know y’all been a bit sore ‘bout havin’ ponies from the Ministry of Arcane Sciences workin’ with us. Ah know y’all are dedicated t’ improvin’ Equestria the earth pony way, an’ magic kinda flies in the face of alla that. But there are some things that’re jus’ too important t’ let stubborn pride get in the way o’ askin’ for help. Trust me. Ah know.

“An’ Ah want y’all t’ know how proud Ah am t’ be standin’ here today, able t’ finally show ya the fruits of yer efforts. Most of ya don’t know whatcha been workin’ on. T’was important t’ keep things...” The next word did not seem to come naturally to her, “...compartmentalized t’ keep this project outta zebra hooves. What y’all have accomplished in just one year... ain’t been a buncha earth ponies do more good work in less time than when we built Appleloosa.”

Until this point, her words were undercut by resentful rumbles of whispered opinion. Now, her voice dropped into a tone both somber and deadly serious. The ponies in the audience began to hush. Not for her, but out of reverence for what she spoke of.

“When Ah was young, my big brother, Big Macintosh, was always there fer me. He was muh closest kin, an’ he never let me down. And when Equestria needed him, he didn’t let us down neither. He served heroically in our army, fighting for our way o’ life for three years. And then, when we needed him most, he made the ultimate sacrifice.

“When that zebra bullet punched through muh brother’s armor an’ pierced his heart, it broke muh heart too.” I could see Applejack’s eyes start to tear. Her voice trembled, but she pressed on. The room was now dead silent except for her.

“One year ago, we buried muh brother, Big Macintosh. And that day, Ah swore an oath that no one other pony would die needlessly in battle. They’re riskin’ their lives out there fer us. We owe them better. An’ now, startin’ today, we give ‘em better.”

My memory escort started walking onto the stage. I felt the ropes trailing from me lift and pull taut, the harness digging into my flesh. I

felt the resistance and heard the wheels of the wagon I was pulling begin to move.

“Ponies of the Ministry o’ Technology, Ah give t’ y’all the Steel Ranger!”



Moments later, the memory collapsed, the last sight lingering in my mind as my own world reasserted itself: a glance back at the display wagon and the magical power armor it was carrying. I looked to SteelHooves, sensing I now understood him far more than I had moments ago.



The light grey of the clouds had descended, shrouding the landscape in fog. All around us, the rubble of blast-flattened and age-demolished buildings created shadows and obstacles. I regularly had to check my E.F.S. compass to make sure we were still headed in the right direction. Even Calamity was grounded to avoid losing us.

We were entering the outskirts of Manehattan now. I felt a pang of disappointment that I couldn’t properly see the city. Calamity and Velvet Remedy had taken the lead. My frequent attention to my Eyes-Forward Sparkle was as much to spot hostile creatures as to navigate.

Another red spot flared up in front of us and just off to the left. “Calamity, seven o’clock.”

Calamity nodded and crouched down, sneaking forward. The fog wrapped about him, concealing him from my vision, but my E.F.S. compass marked his position. Velvet hung back a little, but kept him locked in her sight, her horn glowing faintly as she prepared to throw a shield around the orange-maned pegasus in the black desperado hat.

A moment later, a single twin-shot rang out.

Calamity returned. “Giant radhog.” One of the mutated pig-like creatures I had encountered under the train bridge.

“I do hope you’re not planning to cook and eat that,” Velvet Remedy intoned disparagingly. “I can’t imagine all the meat you’ve been eating did you any good over the last few days.”

I shot her a look that she probably couldn’t see and said nothing.

“Y’see, now that’s why y’all are a vegetarian,” Calamity laughed. “Y’ain’t never had bacon. Trust me, if ponies were meant t’ only eat fruits, oats an’ grasses, then the existence of bacon would be the proof in the pie that the world was just cruel and evil.”

Oh great. Now I *had* to try eating radhog.

A few moments later, we had a cookfire started and Calamity was explaining to me just which parts of a radhog were the most delicious. Velvet Remedy had chosen to join SteelHooves in ignoring the two of us.

Her silky voice sliced through the air as she told SteelHooves, “Now, if we get into a battle, I do hope you have the good sense to let Calamity and Littlepip handle it. No offense -- I really am thankful for your coming to our rescue -- but I came closer to dying from all your explosions than from the alicorns.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way, but Velvet Remedy had a strong point. SteelHooves’ weapons were all extremely... excessive. And while that was very good for fighting manticores or alicorns at a good distance, it could be lethal to everypony in close quarters or enclosed spaces.

I’d have to convince SteelHooves to keep himself in reserve until he was needed. I wasn’t sure how that would go over with the Steel Ranger. Traveling with others and having to take precautions to keep his own companions alive was not, I suspected, something SteelHooves had been required to deal with for a long time.



“...old song,” Calamity was saying to Velvet Remedy as the two of them took the lead once again. “If Ah sang a little bit o’ it (badly, probably) could ya magic up some music t’ go with it?”

“Well,” Velvet said uncertainly. “I could certainly try.” Then, with a reassuring smile, “And your voice is quite good. If you took some singing lessons, you’d be very pleasant to listen to.”

I rolled my eyes. That’s my Velvet.

No, that’s Calamity’s Velvet, I reasserted to myself. And then wiped the whole thought clean; Velvet Remedy was Velvet’s Velvet, and would be until she said otherwise. And even then, only so long as she allowed it. Calamity was going to be Velvet’s Calamity.

And I was not going to be a jealous third wing.

SteelHooves was bringing up the rear. I dropped back, choosing to engage him in discourse rather than dwell on the two ponies in front of me. Trying to strike up conversation, I told him I had a question about the memory I’d seen.

“What question?” His voice suggested there were a great many questions he suspected I might have and that most of them were not really my business.

“The Ministry of Technology -- why M.W.T.?”

When the unseen pony spoke, I could hear a touch of relief in his voice. “Officially, it was the Ministry of Wartime Technologies. But Applejack hated that name. She was always the first to point out that the technological innovations that M.W.T. championed and subsidized benefited all of Equestria, not just the war effort.”

I nodded, listening intently. It was a subject that SteelHooves had some warmth for. But a small flash of green in the sky above us distracted my gaze. I looked up, but saw nothing. I turned to ask SteelHooves if he had seen anything, but he was continuing to speak about Applejack’s Ministry; I doubted a skywagon crash would have diverted his attention.

“Under the Ministry’s guidance and support, dozens of innovative technology industries blossomed across Equestria, and existing ones became a lot more powerful, their products becoming part of every pony’s daily life. Companies like Ironshod, Four Stars, Equestrian Robotics and even Stable-Tec.” He turned his helmeted gaze down towards my PipBuck. “So why use a name focused on war? It *should* have been the Ministry of Technology.”

I heard music. Not Velvet Remedy or Calamity. Patriotic gala music whispering out of the mist. I stopped, turning in place until the little blip of light appeared on my compass.

“Everypony, please hold up. I want to check something.”

“Alone?” SteelHooves questioned.

“Yes,” I nodded. “It’s okay. I’ll be right back.”

“She do this a lot?” I heard him ask my companions as I slipped off into the mist, following the sound.

“Do what?” Calamity snickered. “Wander off? Break travel to explore random ruins? All the time.”



I was approaching a building. Half of it was a huge barn with vast shattered windows. The other half loomed castle-like in the mist. My PipBuck flashed a name across my E.F.S.: Four Stars Grand Terminal and Central Offices.

The music cut out with a static-laced pop. “Hello Watcher.”

“Hello, Littlepip. I see you’ve made a new friend.”

“Maybe,” I said, not committing either way.

As if on cue, SteelHooves’ deep voice resonated through the mist. “Littlepip, you okay?” Wow. Stealthy he was not.

“Hey,” the mechanical voice of Watcher expressed, “That voice sounds familiar.” That didn’t surprise me. SteelHooves’ voice was very

distinctive. And if Watcher had been snooping on the Equestrian Wasteland for any length of time, it may very well have spied on the Steel Rangers.

Watcher: now there was somepony who deserved to be suspected as a covert ops spy pony.

I looked around for the sprite-bot, but the fog concealed it expertly. Instead, I spotted twin vending machines: Sparkle-Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla. And a third set just a few yards down from them: Ironshod's Ammo Emporium. The last had been torn open and thoroughly looted. I felt a chill, imagining the kind of pre-war world where you could buy ammo along with your soft drinks at a street-side machine. No pony interaction necessary.

"Watcher, was there a Ministry of Awesome?" It was just a lead-in question; clearly, I already knew.

"Ah yes, Rainbow Dash." The disembodied artificial voice somehow managed to sound amused even though it had no inflection at all. "Yes, one of Equestria's heroes did decide that her Ministry would be the Ministry of Awesome. They even built a Ministry Headquarters for it on Ministry Walk. I assume Calamity mentioned it?"

I nodded. Then, realizing Watcher possibly couldn't see me any better than I could see the sprite-bot (although it would truly surprise me if that was the case), I stated, "Yes."

Ministry Walk. I'd heard of that place before, but I couldn't quite put my hoof on where or when.

After pondering it fruitlessly, I finally asked, "What did the Ministry of Awesome do?" I hated (loathed) questioning something Calamity had told me, especially based on something SteelHooves had said. Even more so after Calamity had not done the same.

"Not much," Watcher said to my great sense of relief. "I mean, Rainbow Dash did throw two or three projects their way -- the Single Pony Project was one of theirs, for example -- but for the most part,

they just lounged around and did nothing. After a few years, Luna ordered it crated up, and they began using the M.Aw HQ for storage.”

Another question came to me. I activated my PipBuck’s inventory arrangement spell and opened my saddlebags. Then stopped, checking to make sure: “Can you see me?”

“Yes, Littlepip. I can see you.”

Thought so.

I floated out the two statuettes I had found. “What are these?”

Of course Watcher knew the answer. “Limited Edition Ponies of Harmony. Those are some pretty nice little magical artifacts you have there. Only forty-two were ever made.”

“Forty-two?” I was expecting closer to six.

“Equestria’s heroines, the six pony friends whose virtues matched the Elements of Harmony. There were seven sets made -- one for each of them, and one that Luna kept for herself. The ponies mostly gave them to each other, although a few of the statuettes were passed on to loved ones or family members.”

That made sense. Sweetie Belle had her sister’s. Applejack would have given one of herself to her buckfriend Applesnack. I wondered if the one I found in old Appleloosa had originally been a gift for Braeburn.

“Oh. Now I remember who your new friend sounds like.” The name Watcher told me made me glad I wasn’t drinking Sparkle-Cola again.

“Who was...?” I never got to finish my question. A crack of static replaced Watcher with the voice of Red Eye, who was in the middle of telling everyone that raiders, ghouls and hellhounds were bad. His voice faded as the sprite-bot wandered aimlessly away from me until it was swallowed entirely by the mist.



Four Stars was an elevated train company which had once provided public transportation for the Manehattan metropolis. SteelHooves

suggested that, if the monorails were still intact, it would make the easiest route through the city, carrying us over the maze of rubble and away from most of the radiation-twisted aberrations and occasional raiders that lurked in the ruins.

It sounded like a good plan, so I stopped at a still-illuminated sign mapping out the rails. This station was part of the Luna Line. The Celestia Line, which crossed it at several points, lead straight to Tenpony Tower.

Calamity finished rummaging through the garbage bins, returning with a surprising collection of sellable items and a few dozen bottle caps. Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes. "Well, I hope that's enough for you to buy a bath once we get to Tenpony."

I looked across the waiting station towards the heavy doors into the more castle-like office structure. There were blackened panels that looked like turret emplacements which had been destroyed ages ago. Curiously, I trotted over to the door and tried it. Locked.

Well, that was just begging for me to open it.

"What are you doing?" SteelHooves asked as he and the others joined me.

"I want to see what's inside," I said simply, focusing on the lock. This was a hard one. Four Stars did not want to give up its secrets easily. Which only made me all the more intent on learning what those secrets were.

I heard Calamity make a snicker that clearly translated to "told you so".

The lock clicked. Triumphantly, I swung the door open.

In an eye-blink, I registered the expanse of the grey lobby, its semicircular desk fortified with sandbags and makeshift barricades. In that glimpse, I saw the scattered bodies of a dozen Steel Rangers -- suits of magical power armor holding skeletal pony remains. And I saw the three scorched holes in the ceiling which had once held turrets.

The remaining turret on the Four Stars' lobby ceiling swung around and opened fire. I was taken by surprise, but Velvet Remedy had been prepared. Her shield burst around me even as the air was filled with the rat-tat-tat-tat of machine gun fire. However, the shield gave no protection; the bullets ripped right through it. Then through my armor and through me. My body tore apart in agony, dozens of things going horribly wrong inside all at once as at least six shots passed clean through me and buried themselves in the station's floor tiles.

I barely heard the explosive roar of SteelHooves' grenade machine gun as I collapsed, sound and light fleeing from me. It was as if I was falling down a well. Through the distant ring above, I could see the ceiling detonate in a mass of fireballs, then come raining down with a distant thunder, collapsing into the lobby below.



I returned to the wasteland of the living, alert and in pain; Velvet Remedy was pouring another extra-strength restoration potion down my throat. I choked, gasping.

"Welcome back, Littlepip. We came *very* close to losing you," Velvet's voice was stern with worry.

"W-what happened?"

Calamity's voice called out from somewhere further into the rubble. "Armor-piercing bullets." His voice sounded disbelieving and alarmed.

"Stop!" ordered SteelHooves. I panicked, wondering what I was doing that I could stop, but his exclamation was directed towards Calamity. "I will not let you loot the bodies of fallen Rangers."

"Hey," Calamity shot back, "In case ya didn't notice, they ain't usin' this stuff anymore. An' the ammo that ridiculous battle saddle of yers' throws around ain't cheap and ain't the sorta stuff ya find in raiders' ammo boxes or the desk drawers of office buildin's. We need t' scavenge it from wherever we can, whenever we can." Calamity quieted

a moment, then trotted into view with a missile in his mouth. “Fhrusf meh, ‘hey ain’ whissen if.”

He spat out the missile into a pile he was collecting, shooting a glower at SteelHooves.

I looked to Velvet Remedy who was prodding me to drink more. “Right. From now on, sneak into buildings that might not be friendly.”

SteelHooves made his way back to me. I wondered how covert-super-deathpony-like I looked to him now, my armor full of holes and covered in my own sticky blood. (I would need to have it cleaned and mended when I got to Tenpony Tower. Or maybe sooner. I was guessing I didn’t look much better than I had coming out of Ponyville.)

“You definitely got my attention,” he said and turned towards the nearest dead Ranger. “Now I want to know more about this building too.”

I nodded. “Okay. Let’s split up.” I considered keeping Velvet Remedy at my side, but realized it wasn’t the best play. “SteelHooves with me. Velvet, would you mind staying with Calamity? You two look into the rest of this floor and the basement. We’ll check out the offices upstairs.”

Velvet smiled. And then fixed me with a harsh stare. “Be careful. *A lot* more careful than *this* was.”

I promised.



Attention All Four Stars employees:

In conjunction with new safety and security protocols, all employees will be issued a standard military-class firearm. This firearm is to be worn at all times while on company property. Failure to do so, or failure to keep your firearm well-maintained and properly loaded, will be grounds for termination under employee uniform policy 13-B.

In the unlikely event of incursion onto Four Stars private property by government forces, all employees are required to defend Four Stars proprietary property and executive personnel. All employees are therefore required to attend at least one of the three Four-Star-Defense and Teamwork-Building weekend training programs this month. Failure to do so will be grounds for termination under employee attendance policy 6-F.

Daisy May will be providing some of her lovely homebaked flower cookies for refreshments after the FSDTB exercises. Yum!

I'd read that same message before; it was on each terminal I'd hacked into. It didn't make any more sense to me now than the first time. I looked over to SteelHooves, checking to make sure everything was all right, before I clicked the next one.

I figured now was as good a time as any to ask, "SteelHooves, have you ever heard of someone named Flutterguy?"

SteelHooves whinnied. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I heard somepony say your voice sounded like Flutterguy."

SteelHooves gave a little stomp. "Heard that before." My ears perked. I'd figured it was a long shot at best that SteelHooves would have knowledge about the pony Watcher had mentioned. I opened my muzzle to ask, but he silenced me. "It's just a joke."

Oh. So much for insight. I turned back to the terminal messages.

Evacuation Policy, Employee Version:

We here at Four Stars value your commitment to the company. In the extremely unlikely event of a federal raid, or worse, a megaspell attack, it is every employee's duty to bodyguard key personnel and ensure the safe evacuation of all employees in the following order:

- 1) President of Four Stars and any Shareholders on property
- 2) Members of Executive Management
- 3) Head Researchers
- 4) The President's Secretary, Daisy May

5) Members of Mid-Level Management**6) Research Assistants with Red, Black or Gold-level clearance****7) Research Assistants with Orange or White-level clearance****8) Floor Supervisors**

Once all the above have been safely evacuated from the property, we encourage you to seek your own safety.

To ensure your protection, we are issuing military-class armor-piercing ammo to all employees above the Supervisor level.

I sat back from the terminal and promised myself that if ever I was somehow hurled back in time, I would never go to work here.

There was a surprising amount of still-functional arcano-technology in this building. Or, at least, there had been. SteelHooves was not subtle, and every time he took out one of the security brain-bots or spider-like guard bots, he did massive damage to everything nearby. Scavenging had been reduced to finding things inside metal desks or looting boxes of ammo.

Fortunately, there were quite a few of each. Nobody had safely broken into this place in centuries, and the sheer number of ammo boxes alone could have supported a small army. Calamity had been right. Not one of the boxes included missiles or grenade ammo. But we had enough of just about everything else, including a lot of armor-piercing rounds, to last a good long time. With extra to sell. The prevalence of armor-piercing ammo had SteelHooves convinced this place had been fortifying specifically against the Steel Rangers.

There was one more. And this one seemed a private message, not duplicated on any other terminal yet.

Re: Satin:

I hear that the Ministry of Morale got her. Charges of sedition. MoM agents broke into her house in the middle of the night last weekend and hauled her away.

Management is throwing fits on the floor above me; they seem sure Satin will say something, or worse, remember something. All I know is, I'm expecting armored Ministry goons to buck in the doors any day now.

Fuck these appleseed shooters. I'm going to start bringing my gun from home!



SteelHooves turned away, protecting my flank, as I snuck forward. I split my attention between the hall and my E.F.S. compass as I scouted ahead -- checking rooms, digging into desks and looking through bookshelves, until another splash of red lit up on my compass. Backtracking, I pointed SteelHooves in the direction of the next hostile; then I lingered back in a side room, not wanting to be caught in the backwash that accompanied any attack he made in a narrow hallway.

A robotic voice called out, *"This is private property, federal pigs! Surrender and be annihilated!"* It was immediately followed by the whoosh of a rocket. The hallway erupted in flame. To my surprise, I heard SteelHooves hit the floor.

Luna shitting moon rocks! That was from the security robot! What kind of robot fires missiles?

I pulled out my sniper rifle, loading armor-piercing bullets into it. Then, crouching low, I took a peek around the corner.

The robot took up most of the hall, and looked like the mutant child of a Steel Ranger and a tank. Its four legs ended in treaded balls that propelled it slowly down the corridor. I counted at least three weapons, including a missile launcher turret and a minigun set into a swiveling chest mount that could rotate 180 degrees around the robot's frame.

My mind searched for an appropriate level of profanity, but came up blank as a newborn's flank.

The thing was rolling towards SteelHooves, who was moving but down. The chest minigun swung towards the fallen Ranger. I was quite certain that it had armor-piercing ammo of its own.

Leaping around the corner, I swung the sniper rifle and stared down its scope. That minigun stopped pointing towards SteelHooves and began to turn towards me as I slid into S.A.T.S.' targeting nirvana. The sniper rifle roared off three shots in quick succession.

The first two bullets punched small holes in the "head" of the tank-like sentinel, seeming to only slightly impair its targeting. The sentinel's minigun tore up the wall, a single bullet tearing into my armor for a deeply grazing hit across my left flank.

My third shot hit struck into the missile turret, which promptly exploded. The rockets had been designed to take out a Steel Ranger; they were just as effective in rendering the sentinel inert.

My left hindleg felt wobbly, fresh blood mixing with the matted, sticky mess of my coat. I hobbled over to SteelHooves. His armor was administering healing potions and bolstering drugs. The armor's self-repair spell was consuming scrap metal from an armored compartment over his right flank, rebuilding itself. I stopped a moment to marvel at what Applejack and her Ministry had created.

"Will you be okay?" I asked. SteelHooves nodded, stalwartly not moaning. "Then I'll be right back. I want to know what that monster was guarding."



The sentinel robot had been guarding the office suite of the President of Four Stars. The desk was armored, designed for use as a barricade, and there was a hidden panel in the wall... well, it would have been hidden if it had been closed. The desk was locked. Picking it cost me a bobby pin and netted me what looked like a security passcard. I nickered at the irony, suspecting the card would have let us freely pass by all the robotic security we had to fight through to get here.

Several locked boxes of ammo were hidden under the desk. As I opened the first, I found half a dozen matrix-disruption grenades. I knew immediately that they were designed to disrupt the spell matrixes of Steel Ranger armor, rendering them helpless just as the alicorn's attack had done to SteelHooves. But I couldn't help thinking how such grenades would also disrupt the more mundane technologies of most robots, including the one guarding this room. "Magical shotgun of dragonslaying in the dragon's chamber, indeed."

It took me several tries to hack into the computer, each time backing out before it could recognize the intrusion and lock me out completely.

Evacuation Policy, Executive Version:

When Manehattan suffers a megaspell event -- or worse, if the Ministry of Morale stages a raid on this property -- all executive officers of Four Stars are to proceed to the basement stable in accordance to evacuation procedures ZS 1A 5D, listed below. Please keep to your assigned routes.

The Four Stars Stable is guaranteed to keep you safely protected in the event of either catastrophe, and has food, water and medical supplies to outlast even a complete megaspell event -- nearly twelve whole weeks' worth!

The FSS also includes an armory, firing range to keep in practice and plenty of reading material to keep you occupied. These include instruction manuals on how to acclimate yourself to the new exterior environment once aftereffects of megaspell detonations have subsided, and proper etiquette for greeting our ruling zebra benefactors.

Okie. Dokey. Lokey.

Steel Rangers were not Ministry of Morale. Somepony had called in the big guns. And worse, the ponies in charge had been expecting it. What were they doing?

According to the attached map, the "hidden" stairs would lead us right down to the basement. We should be able to meet up with Calamity and Velvet Remedy swiftly from there.

I began picking the lock on the weapon's cabinet. Like the terminal, it pushed the limits of my skills. I was tempted to use one of my Party-

Time Mint-als to give me that extra edge. But just before I gave up and did so, the cabinet opened.

Inside was an armored dress unlike any I'd seen before -- red and black with golden trim, perfectly preserved. I pulled it out and draped it over my back, thinking Velvet Remedy would look stunning in it. The armor also came with a helmet, but I was tempted to leave it. The flourish of red feathers almost screamed "target".

Also inside were several assault carbines of a peculiar and impressive design. One of them was scoped and fitted with a silencer. It had a custom wood-carved handle stained with stripes of white and black.



"Been waiting for you, Li'lpip." Calamity smiled at me as I joined him in the basement. He and Velvet Remedy stood before a door sealed with a terminal. Looking at the terminal, I was pleased to discover that it had a magic eye for scanning passcards. Damn thing would be useful after all.

I offered Velvet Remedy the outfit I had found. She shunned the helmet as "garish", but soon had Calamity helping her into the armored dress. I turned my attention to the terminal, floating up the passcard.

"Where in hell did you find that?" SteelHooves' voice boomed as he finally caught up with us. I turned to look at him as I telekinetically held the passcard in place. SteelHooves had stopped at the bottom of the stairs and was staring at Velvet Remedy.

"Littlepip found it in a locker upstairs," Velvet Remedy answered, prancing. "How do you think it looks on me?"

"Beautiful," answered Calamity with a breath. "The red and gold matches the streaks in your mane and tail." Then with a sheepish grin, "And I've never seen anything like it. Which means nopony will mistake you for a raider or slaver and accidentally shoot you."

The terminal's magic eye looked over the passcard and bleeped happily. "Welcome Missus President!" Inner mechanics began to hiss

and grind as the door began to open. This wasn't anything as sophisticated as a Stable-Tec door, but it was certainly a few grades above anything I'd seen in the wasteland.

"I might shoot her," SteelHooves grumbled. We all shot him perplexed and nasty looks.

"That," he explained, "Is a Zebra Legionnaire's uniform."

Calamity whistled. Velvet Remedy suddenly looked uncomfortable. I turned away, choosing to look instead into the darkness of the open mini-stable in front of me.

Gleaming in the darkness, the eyes of at least a dozen zombie-ponies stared back at me. Then I did a double-take. Zombies, yes. But not ponies.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Action Filly (level one) - You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.S.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



TOWERS

“You see? We remain the very picture of courtesy, even in the face of such impolite accusations. We have nothing to hide here.”

Manhattan.

Just over two hundred years ago, it was a thriving, bustling metropolis. Manhattan was hailed as the most cosmopolitan city in all of Equestria. Millions of ponies lived or worked in the city, and it was home to some of the most elite circles of Equestrian society.

Then, in an instant, Manhattan was gone. Millions of pony lives were consumed in a flash of light, heat and magical energy. Hundreds of thousands more were killed by the shockwaves and the eldritch green fires that incinerated virtually everything that was left standing.

Now, all that remained of Manhattan in the aftermath of that apocalypse were the Manhattan Ruins: miles upon miles of maze-like urban devastation and ashes under the shadows of skeletal skyscrapers that rose out of the wreckage like monolithic tombstones.

A pony might wonder how such a holocaust could have been allowed to happen. How could Equestria's enemies have smuggled such a cataclysmic weapon into the very heart of our grandest and largest metropolis?

I found it was much easier to understand now that I knew that the most significant public transportation company in Manehattan was run by traitor ponies loyal to Equestria's enemies, and that the basement of this very facility had been the staging ground for zebra operations within our homeland.

I stared into the eyes of the zombie-zebras and realized that *this* was how they had gotten the balefire bomb into Manehattan. That *these* zebras had been responsible for the murder of millions.

I also realized that the mini-stable under Four Stars fell far short of Stable-Tec's quality -- for all the harm Stable-Tec's playing around had done, those ponies really knew how to build a survival shelter. This inferior stable had not been able to stop magical radiation from bleeding in, transforming the zebras (and almost a dozen ponies) it had been intended to protect into the ghoulish creatures before me.

And yes, I realized they might not be zombie-zebras so much as ghoul-zebras. I'd say I didn't care, but part of me actually hoped they were ghouls as I stepped back out of the way.

"SteelHooves! Give 'em everything you've got!"



The fog lifted by mid afternoon, revealing the graveyard of the Manehattan Ruins beneath a sky of rolling, angry grey. We walked above it, traveling single-file along one of the twin monorails of the Luna Line, looking down on the blocks of city rubble below. In all directions we saw collapsed and gutted buildings, blackened chariots and wagons, detritus and blown litter that congregated about the metal shafts of shattered streetlamps. No skeletons, though. The living creatures of Manehattan had been reduced to nothing more than ash,

mixing with the ash from a billion other sources as it was carried by the wind.

I was beginning to spot a few small places where green balefire still burned. I wondered how even balefire could have survived for centuries.

The wind carried particles of rust and ash, as well as the smells of the urban graveyard. A symphony of creaks and groans haunted the city, mixing with the sounds of shifting and crumbling concrete and the hammering of wind-blown metal. Occasional staccatos of gunfire, usually distant and carried on echoes, reminded us that there were raiders, scavengers and others ponies lurking in hidden streets and darkened structures.

A flash of green and gold shot past us from behind -- a magnificent bird both terrifying and graceful which spread its wings and circled as if taking in our measure. Its eyes seemed to glow and licks of balefire fell from its beak.

“What is that?” Velvet Remedy asked with a tone of awe before I could find the words to ask for myself.

“Balefire Phoenix,” SteelHooves replied, whistling slightly.

The green and gold bird completed its circle, then swooped down and away, disappearing from sight as it threaded through shadowed alleys.

We began to move again, all except Velvet Remedy who just stood there as if mesmerized. She turned to SteelHooves, breathily demanding, “Tell me about them.”

Whinnying, we all halted again. (Interesting fact about traveling single-file: if one pony stops, unless they’re at the back, travel tends to stop with them.) I found myself staring at a ruined billboard whose bottle of Sparkle-Cola RAD seemed to actually glow. (“It’s like a buck to the face! With radishes!”) Billboards littered the sky along the Luna Line like weeds.

“The Manehattan Gardens was the largest wildlife sanctuary of its kind, home to the most exotic and admired creatures. All of which were

instantly cremated when the zebras' balefire bomb detonated," SteelHooves explained. "Of course, a phoenix doesn't exactly have the same relationship with being turned to ash that most creatures do."

SteelHooves chuckled. "I wouldn't be thinking of trying to domesticate one. They breathe fire."



A battered sea-blue mare fled out of a doorless storefront and started running down the street, tears streaming from her eyes as she screamed.

A dozen raider ponies, each carrying a brutal weapon and wearing an old roller derby helmet, came tearing out of the building after her, jumping out the windows and charging out the door, whooping and laughing.

"Help me!" She stumbled as she ran, her gait hobbled. Blood ran down between her thighs; I could see her bleeding through my scope. *"Please somepony help me!"* She'd already been raped repeatedly. Now they had let her go and were chasing her for sport.

From the height of the Luna Line, we were too far for S.A.T.S. to effectively lock on, so I trailed the scope in front of the first raider -- a mottled brown and grey pony with a cutie mark of a skull with burning eyes -- aiming for where he was about to be as Calamity instructed.

"Good, now keep 'er steady an' squeeze out a burst."

I magically pulled the trigger. Three shots spat out of the scoped zebra assault carbine. Silenced weapons, I learned, were not really silent; but the dampened sound was lost in the wind, and the weight of the silencer helped soften the recoil and keep the rifle on target between bullets.

The raider pony burst into flame. He fell to the ground, screaming and thrashing.

I stepped back, floating up the rifle to check the clip while Calamity took a shot. No, I hadn't accidentally loaded magical bullets. The zebra rifle had enchanted the bullet itself.

Stick a horn where Celestia don't shine! If this was the sort of weapon that zebras had been carrying onto the battlefield...

The screams of the victim mare below wrenched my attention back to the battle. Calamity fired off a second shot. Pulling the scope to my eyes, I saw that three of the raiders were now dead (one of the corpses burning in the street), and the others were scattering. The panicking mare screamed, her hooves catching on a toppled streetlamp, and fell, skidding across the debris-strewn street.

One of the raiders was still charging towards her; I swung the scope towards him. And froze as I really saw him -- one of the rapists had been a blank-flanked colt!

I stared, following the very young pony with the zebra rifle's scope, trembling slightly. He was wearing a colts roller-derby helmet and clenched a serrated knife in his mouth. I could see her blood on him. I focused, the trigger of the zebra rifle moving slightly...

I couldn't. It was a *colt*!

Horried, I watched as the colt reached the fallen mare dodging the kicks she threw at him. I heard the crack of gunfire feet from me, and saw the colt's body rupture bloodily in two places, hit with enough force to fling his corpse against a nearby mailbox.

I lowered the zebra rifle and turned to stare at Calamity in shock. On the other side of him, Velvet Remedy's eyes were wide.

"What?" Calamity asked before flying down to help the mare. "Did Ah steal yer shot?"



Ponies love laughter. Zebras do not understand joy and fear it.

Ponies are honest. Zebras tell only lies.

Ponies are loyal. Zebras will knife you in the back.

Ponies are generous. Zebras are selfish and greedy.

Ponies care about each other. Zebras care only about themselves.

I stared up at the billboard and thought: wow.

“That’s... that’s just wrong,” Velvet Remedy said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had become our traveling companion since Calamity shot the raider colt.

The twin monorail tracks took a graceful curve, and the billboard was mounted across the flying buttresses of a squat skyscraper, placed so that the train ponies would see it as they approached the turn. It would have dominated the view out one side of the elevated train as it took the bend.

Calamity had flown off ahead, more to give us space than out of a need to scout. The Luna Line seemed free of threats.

I really wanted a Party-Time Mint-al. I didn’t have any particular need for one, but I felt myself craving the effects, especially the intellectual boost. I could just think so much faster, so much more clearly while benefiting from a PTM. I was more aware, my senses more acute.

If that’s what Party-Time Mint-als did for me, I began to wonder what they did for Pinkie Pie?

I found myself thinking about Four Stars again. Based on what we had found in the mini-stable (which wasn’t much after SteelHooves’ ordnance was finished with the zebras), the Ministry of Morale raid must have happened the same morning that the balefire bomb was set off. It occurred to me that the megaspell was probably in transit when they attacked.

The Ministry of Morale had brought in Steel Rangers; they knew what they were heading into called for the big guns. Knowing where to look, who to interrogate... did that come from the skill of the ponies in her

employ, or did Pinkie Pie herself discern these things with the power of PTM-enhanced acumen? Biased, I presumed the latter.

No matter what negative effects she might have suffered from PTM addiction, Pinkie Pie had intuition that bordered on precognition. The traitors were terrified of her Ministry; she had them paranoid and scurrying. And no matter what anypony might say about either her or her Ministry, Pinkie Pie had come heartbreakingly close to saving Manehattan.

I stopped, looking out over the desolate urban maze. Millions of ponies had died here, their salvation racing the clock and losing.

I had to find something else to think about. I switched on DJ Pon3's radio broadcast, listening to it in my earbloom. It was merely a distraction; I knew all the songs by heart now. I hoped DJ Pon3 found something in the records we carried worthy of expanding his musical repertoire.

"This just in," DJ Pon3 announced between songs, "Just got a report that a weak distress signal can be heard near Horseshoe Tower. Seems like Blackwing's Talons have managed to get themselves in over their beaks. Well, don't worry, Blackwing. Horseshoe Tower's pretty close to Sheriff Rottingtail's territory. Maybe some of his ghouls will be willing to lend you a hoof. Oh, wait, that's right, you and your mercs slaughtered them all. Well, good luck with that.

"This is DJ Pon3 reminding everypony in the Equestrian Wasteland: you reap what you sow."

Calamity was flying back towards us. I turned off the radio on my PipBuck as he landed on the monorail, "Y'all gonna love this."

Several minutes later, we had trotted far enough along the curve to see what Calamity had told us about. Ahead, the Celestia Line crossed over the Luna Line. About twenty feet above the Luna Line, running perpendicular to the twin monorails below. The dark underside of the twin Celestia rails struck me as bizarrely textured, giving me the creeps.

"Well how do we get up there?" Velvet Remedy scoffed.

Calamity rolled his eyes and fluttered his wings. “Ah carry y’all up is how. ‘Cept Ah’m thinkin’ our Steel Ranger friend is a might heavy for me.”

“I can levitate him up as you carry me,” I offered.

Calamity nodded. “All right then. Jus’ be careful, Li’lpip. Ya don’t wanna disturb the bloodwings.”

“Bloodwings?” I floated out the binoculars, peering through them at the Celestia Line, and cringed with a gasp. The shadowed underbellies of the monorails were covered with the grotesque, leathery forms of dozens of giant, mutant bats.

“Ayep. Ah figure we best make good time t’ Tenpony. Reckon we don’t wanna be outside in the open come nightfall.”



As difficult as it was to get onto the Celestia Line, getting off the monorail was easy. Twilight was falling as we rounded a bend and were met with a graceful arch of tarnished silver which flowed up and over the monorails. Through the arch, we could finally see Tenpony Tower in its surprisingly well-preserved splendor. We had been catching glimpses of it above and between the buildings for hours, but only now could we really take in the size and ornateness of the structure.

Light glowed behind more than half of the windows, most of which bore fractures but were fully intact. The building narrowed every dozen stories with a level ringed by a patio balcony, the fencing around each spotted with crude repair. One whole side of Tenpony Tower was blackened and sagging, bulwarked by patchwork reinforcements added over post-apocalyptic decades. The original name of the building had collapsed into the cobblestone courtyard below. A huge radio broadcast tower rose from the roof towards the sky.

The monorails passed under the archway (which would once have been dazzling in the sun) and right up to Tenpony Tower, where they ran

through a Four Stars embarking station built into the side of the tower many stories above the ground.

From the tarnished arch hung a sign proclaiming:

Ministry of Arcane Science

Manehattan Hub

Entering the station, we saw guard ponies barricaded behind massive steel walls, watching our approach through narrow slits as they followed our progress with their guns. The walls of the station were decorated with life-size paintings of ponies. Once, the paintings had been protected by fields of magical energy similar to Velvet Remedy's spell. Now, most of the paintings were blackened, damaged or defaced beyond repair, the shields having failed and the gemstones which held their enchantments stolen. All save for one: a painting of a familiar purple unicorn, the once pink and violet stripes in her mane mostly changed to grey.

I hopped onto the sidewalk that ran along the wall, giving the painting a closer look. The edges were charred and the paint had blistered in the heat, but the protective field still held.

The others paused, watching me, but I waved them on. "I just want to look. I'll catch up." Each of my companions nodded and trotted on, none of them seeming to possess my curiosity.

While no spring filly, Twilight Sparkle looked at least a decade younger in this painting than in the memory of Pinkie Pie's last party, and considerably happier. She was surrounded by crisp autumn colors, a number of hazy, barely-rendered ponies creating colorful blotches around her in the background. Her cutie mark was hidden, covered by a flank-blanket bearing the number 10.

"The Running of the Leaves," a voice announced from behind me, startling me so badly I nearly jumped back to my death. I turned to glare at the sprite-bot which had seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

“Twilight Sparkle ran it every year in Ponyville. Never won.” To me, the mechanical voice sounded... nostalgic? “That was, until the Ministry demanded all of her time.”

I gazed at the purple pony with the “10” on her flank; then I looked up to the mostly intact skyscraper which had once been a Ministry of Magic hub, the massive letters that once advertised its name fallen and shattered on the ground below. And then looked back.

“Heh,” I smiled.

Turning to the sprite-bot, “How did you know Twi...” But with a crack of static, Watcher was gone, the sprite-bot suddenly spewing tuba-music. I scowled as I watched the spherical robot bob away. Was it just me, or were conversations with Watcher getting shorter?



“Ponies don’t simply walk into Tenpony Tower,” the guardpony informed us, scowling through an armored window as he spoke through the intercom. The words NO ZOMBIES! were painted across the gate in huge red letters.

“We have business with DJ Pon3,” Velvet Remedy stated loftily. “Although if you want to explain to him that you turned us away...”

“DJ Pon3 is expecting you, then?”

“Absolutely,” Velvet Remedy lied silkily. “And if I were you, I would not keep him waiting.”

“All of you?” the voice was skeptical.

Velvet Remedy gave an overly dramatic sigh. “This is my bodyguard,” she claimed, pointing to Calamity. “And I’m sure you recognize a member of the Steel Rangers.”

“I-I do...”

“And...” Velvet looked to me and seemed to draw a blank.

Hastily, I offered, “Toaster repairpony.” Everypony gave me a strange look. “His... um... toaster’s on the fritz?” Velvet Remedy looked pained.

The guard contemplated us silently. Finally, Velvet Remedy said, “Look, as much as I’d love to just stand here outside while you get in trouble for not letting us in, it is getting dark. Would one hundred bottle caps help move this along?”

“Two hundred.”

“One-hundred and twenty-five. And I don’t tell DJ Pon3 that you tried to extort his guests.”

“Fine.” The gun slot opened in the door. “Slide the caps through, then you can come in.” I started pulling out and counting bottle caps. I was going to have to start bundling them into small pouches of twenty to make this sort of thing easier. Two hundred was a large chunk of the bottle caps we’d managed to acquire, but I wasn’t worried. We had plenty of guns and ammo to sell once inside.

“Oh,” the guard added, “And you’ll have to disarm before passing through the checkpoint.”

Stick a horn...

“Y’all ain’t gettin’ muh battle saddle less ya pry it offa my cold, dead...”

The guard scoffed. “Wouldn’t expect to. You don’t have to turn in your firearms and battle saddles. Just your ammo. All of it.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Unexpected. That also severely cut our trade goods, but at least left us with the more expensive and heavier objects to sell off.

As we passed through the checkpoint, a unicorn stepped out of the guardpost and waved her horn over us. Every clip, bullet, grenade and missile flashed, visible even through SteelHooves’ metal armor. “Toaster repairpony,” she repeated with a demure smile as her gaze passed over my sniper rifle, combat shotgun, zebra rifle, assault carbine...

I facehoofed.

“And a Steel Ranger?” she asked as she removed the missiles from the left side of SteelHooves’ battle saddle. “What is your story?”

SteelHooves whinnied. “I’m just here to make sure you don’t have any more nasty ghoul problems.”

“Oh, that is no longer a concern,” she smiled. “But thank you for the concern.”

“Indeed. Can’t have a filthy ghoul just walking in anywhere.”

Calamity was shooting SteelHooves dark looks. Velvet Remedy nickered under her breath, just loud enough to make sure she was heard, “Oh yes. They’re unsightly things. Can’t imagine anything worse, except maybe a colt-killer.”

Calamity neighed and rolled his eyes, lowering the brim of his hat.

In minutes, we were divested of all our ammunition. “You will get all of this back when you leave,” the unicorn promised primly as she collected it all and floated it into the guardhouse.

“Ah feel... strangely nekkid,” Calamity complained. At least my weapons had only been reduced to fancy clubs.

“You can probably buy some rubber bullets from Chief Grim Star if you really feel you need to,” the unicorn informed us as the guardhouse door slid shut behind her. Calamity and I exchanged surprised looks. It was the first I’d heard of anypony utilizing non-lethal ordnance.

There was a loud *CLANK* as something released inside the ornate, armored double doors in front of us. They opened, swinging inwards and revealing the marbled, chandelier-lit station lobby of Tenpony Tower.



We were getting looks. The idea of high society was completely foreign to me. We’d had nothing like this sort of bizarre elitism in Stable

Two. The wasteland was a dirty, broken, rusted place that was completely at odds with stuffy behavior; the only reason a pony might walk around with their nose in the air in places like New Appleloosa was because they didn't want to smell what they were walking in.

"Let us hurry and find a place to make bed," Velvet Remedy pushed. "I need a bath."

"Hell, these folk're makin' me feel like *Ah* need a bath," Calamity said, his head low, feeling the weight of all the stares.

"You do."

I nodded, wondering just how we would find a place to stay. We were walking across a mezzanine filled with high-class shops (or, at least, high-class relative to the rest of the Equestrian Wasteland). If we wanted to buy or sell anything here, Velvet Remedy had her work cut out for her. I suspected that she was the only one with enough mercantile *savoir-faire* to get these ponies to even talk to her.

Velvet Remedy seemed to read my mind. "Once we've bathed and rested, we should split up. I'll take our goods to sell first thing in the morning, and then purchase us some new formal wear that will help us blend in. Littlepip, you should look into meeting with DJ Pon3." I agreed.

"Ah want t' find a workshop. Ah want t' modify muh battle saddle. Until travelin' with Li'lpip, Ah never had more'n one type o' ammo. Want t' set up a quick way t' swap 'tween ammo types. Be nice t' be able t' use rubber bullets when the situation calls fer it." He looked at Velvet and me. "Y'all should give me yer guns so Ah can do them some proper maintenance while Ah'm at it."

Velvet Remedy floated her needler pistol over to him. "Situations like shooting a colt, perhaps?"

Calamity neighed. "Nope. Ah see a raider, ah'm gonna take 'im down." The rust-colored pony stared defiantly at Velvet Remedy, proudly insisting, "It's muh policy."

"It was a *child!*" Velvet Remedy hissed, giving a stomp.

I looked around; my companions were beginning to make a scene. “um... maybe we should save this for...”

“Anypony who chooses t’ be a filthy, murderin’ *raider* gets tried an’ perforated as an adult,” Calamity asserted.

“And you think a colt or filly in that situation had any actual *choice*?”

Calamity’s eyes narrowed and he cocked his head. “Well, maybe not. Damn tragedy. But that don’t mean Ah’m gonna give ‘im a free pass t’ rape and murder till he gets his cutie mark. His would-be future victims don’t deserve that.” Calamity’s voice was rising dangerously. “In case ye didn’t notice, My Little Rapist down there...”

“Shut up!” I finally ordered. “I swear to the Goddesses, I’m going to put you both in corners!”

Velvet Remedy and Calamity both bristled. But the interruption was enough to get them to look around and realize that this was not the place to be having that particular fight. The two of them remained silent for the rest of the evening while I found us a place at *Goldentail’s Luxury Suites*. It was a beautiful room, the marble walls only slightly cracked, the twin bathtubs were only lightly stained and the sheets on the beds were not too worn or frayed. I probably paid double what Velvet Remedy would have gotten it for, but I was happy just to get them away from the public.



Tempers were more even the next morning. We had all bathed and washed our clothing. Calamity spent the first part of the morning sewing and patching our armor. My armored utility barding had been crusted with blood and punctured with bullet holes. Meanwhile, Velvet Remedy packed up the weapons and scavenged items for trade and headed out before the stores were open, wanting to look over her options.

I spent the morning hungry. We decided that we would wait until Velvet Remedy returned with proper Tenpony attire before heading out

to buy food. There were several swanky-looking restaurants that we had passed on our way to *Goldentail's Luxury Suites*, and I was sick of canned and boxed pre-war food (which, as Velvet reminded us, we were almost out of and would need to stock up on).

I took the chance to relax, laying on one of the beds and reading. I'd nearly finished all of the books I had collected, and I had contemplated giving most of them to Velvet Remedy to sell. But in the end, I decided that I would rather keep them back at my Junction R-7 home. Start a library.

When Velvet Remedy returned, bringing us all new clothing (even a stately cloak for SteelHooves), I nearly fell out of bed at the sight of her. She'd treated herself to a new coiffure and ponypedi, and she was wearing a classy new dress with matching new jewelry along with a demure touch of blush. She fluttered her longer-than-ever eyelashes at me and I felt faint. Part of me hated her for making me want her so much.

"Wow... Velvet you look..." Calamity flushed, looking a little overheated. But he stammered something about hoping she had saved enough bottle caps for us to have breakfast.

She turned up her nose at him, "Of course I did." Looking to me, she broke into a gleeful grin, clopping her hooves. "And we have plenty extra to do a little shopping."

"What do they have?"

Velvet Remedy smirked, rolling her eyes. "Oh you wouldn't believe. These ponies have taken full-of-themselves to a whole new level." She snickered. "Two floors down, there is a shop that sells only cheese. Right across from a shop that sells only wine."

As classy as she could be, Velvet Remedy didn't put any more value in being snobbish than the rest of us. "But of course, half the fun of shopping is just looking. Why, was there something you were looking for?"

"Some new books. And rubber bullets."

Velvet Remedy sighed.



The restaurant was classy and filled with prim-looking ponies. I looked at my plate of “food” with a touch of depression. I don’t know why I had expected much more; it wasn’t as if the ponies of Tenpony Tower were farmers with fields of fresh grains. Instead, we got the same pre-war foods, only cooked in new ways and served in tiny but artistic portions.

It didn’t take long to eat. And I was still hungry.

After breakfast, we split up. Calamity and SteelHooves went to find Chief Grim Star, hoping to purchase bullets and possibly a suit of armored barding more suitable for Velvet Remedy. The zebra legionnaire suit was stored away in SteelHooves’ packs. Velvet Remedy didn’t feel right wearing it, especially as we walked over the graves of countless ponies the zebras had murdered, and I didn’t blame her. But I hated to just leave it or sell it when it could be useful.

Velvet and I went to purchase supplies. Food was a high priority. (Especially since I had no intention of eating at a restaurant again for as long as we were here.) Looking at the rows of cans and boxes in *Fine Edibles*, I cringed at the prices. “Maybe we should just get the minimum we will need for the next couple days. We’re bound to find more if we do a bit of scavenging.”

Velvet Remedy agreed, but only because she had other intentions for the caps we would save by doing so. We stocked up lightly, then I watches as Velvet Remedy haggled with the shop clerk until she got us a discount. As soon as we left *Fine Edibles*, I found myself being shoved into a spa where Velvet Remedy absolutely insisted we both get full-body treatments.

I was resistant at first, but as I began to unwind in the steam room, feeling muscles loosen that had probably been tight since my last night in the Stable, I found myself letting out a grand sigh of relief.

A couple of delightful spa-ponies gave us an absolutely heavenly massage. This was easily the best caps I had ever spent. And, truth be told, the spa mare hoofing my back was beginning to really turn me on.

“I heard that Fluttershy went to one of these places every week with my great, great... add a bunch of greats here... grand-auntie,” Velvet Remedy confided as the lovely spa pony rubbed her hooves on my shoulders. I suddenly felt extra-awkward.

Later as we lounged in a mud bath, my eye spotted a book sitting alone on a counter. Curious, I floated it over to take a look. “*Principles of Proper Pony Speech*,” I read aloud. “Refining how we think by refining how we speak.” I opened the book and looked down the title page. At the bottom, in small words: Official guidelines from the Ministry of Image.

I decided I’d ask the spa pony if I could buy the book.



We were returning to our room after the most delightful morning I’d had probably ever, and my attention was focused on slipping my newly purchased book into my saddlebags, when I collided with a stallion who was backing out of the cheese shop, knocking him over. My book fell to the floor along with a number of boxes full of cheese.

I recovered and began to offer him apologies and assistance when my eyes fell the cheese-shaped cutie mark on his beige flank. “You!”

Monterey Jack stood up, dusting himself off. “Oh. It’s *you*.”

A short grey unicorn wearing a refined full barding trotted out and looked at the scattered cheese. Then at us. “Is there a problem here?”

“Yeah. This... pony... tried to rob me! After I saved his life!”

Now I was the one creating a scene, and I didn’t care. Velvet Remedy was staring. Monterey Jack started picking up the boxes of cheese, lifting them with his teeth by their wrapping strings. He ignored me like I was small, yapping animal.

“Is that true?” the grey unicorn asked, looking to Monterey Jack.

Monterey just snorted and finished stacking the cheese boxes, then focused, floating them towards the grey unicorn in the suit. “Sorry about that, Homage. I’ll credit your account ten percent for the rough handling.”

“Yes, it’s true,” I supplied for the beige unicorn. Of course his cutie mark looked like cheese. Monterey Jack ran the cheese shop.

A guard pony in old M.A.S. Security Armor and a LSW battle saddle was trotting towards us. Turning towards him, I pointed at Monterey. “Sir, I’d like this pony arrested.”

The guard pony looked both of us up and down. “On what charge?”

“Attempted robbery.”

The guard chuckled. “Monterey Jack’s prices may be steep, but that’s a stretch.”

I shook my head. “No. I rescued him from raiders and he repaid me by trying to rob me.” Turning a glare on Monterey Jack, I added, “They were going to shoot your hooves off, if I remember correctly. Maybe I should have let them.”

The guard looked at me skeptically. “When was this?”

I paused, and double-checked the date on my PipBuck. “Three weeks ago.” Had it really been only that long? I felt like I’d been outside a lot longer.

“Sorry,” the guard said finally. “But it’s your word against his, and frankly, seeing as you aren’t a Tenpony citizen, your word doesn’t mean much here.”

I fumed. “You mean he gets away with it?”

“Littlepip,” Velvet Remedy said softly, putting a calming hoof on my shoulder. “Put it in the past. He may have tried to rob you, but he didn’t succeed.”

I shrugged off her hoof and rounded on Monterey Jack. “So, you’re going to just stand there and deny it, are you? Well I...”

“No,” he said firmly.

“...am not going... wait... what?”

“Monterey?” Homage was looking at the beige cheese shop unicorn, her purchases momentarily forgotten. The guard pony had suddenly stiffened.

“I have two colts and a filly to look after. I had to make it home safely, and those supplies would have been wasted on you. You weren’t even smart enough to loot corpses. You wouldn’t have survived the week.”

“Clearly not,” Velvet Remedy deadpanned.

“Monterey Jack,” the guard said dangerously. “Do you realize what you are admitting here?”

Monterey Jack snorted, staring at me. “I’m not a liar. And I’m not ashamed of what I tried to do. Making sure my children still have a father is more important than some foalish little stranger who doesn’t have the good sense not to walk into a slaver camp.” He looked to the guard, “After Clarinet was killed, I’m all they have left.”

The guard pony neighed. “Well, probably not anymore. You know the law. Banditry will get you executed.”

Wait, wait, *WHAT?!*

Velvet Remedy gasped. The guard clamped the bit on his battle saddle and I heard the light support weapon reload. “Sorry, Monterey Jack, but you’re going to have to come with me.”

“um... I’ve changed my mind. I’m not pressing charges. Nothing happened.”

The guard scowled at me. “Sorry kid. But it’s your word against his. And like I said, your non-citizen word doesn’t mean the dirt on my hoof around here.”



I paced back in forth outside the elevator. This was insane. They can't kill a pony for trying and failing to rob somepony, could they? Goddesses, why didn't I just keep my stupid mouth shut?

The elevator doors opened. I'd left Velvet Remedy looking into the laws of Tenpony Tower, hoping she could find something while I attempted to talk to DJ Pon3. Stepping into the elevator, I added this to the list of things I wanted to ask him about.

For that matter, why couldn't Monterey Jack have just kept his own mouth shut. In the Equestrian Wasteland, honesty was *not* always a virtue.

The elevator began to glide upwards. I took a deep breath. I was about to meet DJ Pon3. I wondered what to expect. I hoped he'd be willing to talk with me. If not, this would have been a long walk for nothing. Well no, not nothing. It was a long walk for a spa treatment.

Actually still somewhat worth it.

The doors opened, and I stepped out into a rich marble foyer, the center of which was dominated by a water fountain. A huge alicorn made of age-darkened brass reared up before me, wings spread out over the foyer. The necklace around the alicorn's neck bore a water talisman with a large sapphire set into the center. Thanks to the talisman, the fountain still flowed with fresh, clean water even two-hundred years after the apocalypse. I remembered the pure, non-irradiated water we had enjoyed in our baths and in the spa, and I wondered just how many water talismans the M.A.S. hub had. And how many could benefit from them if they weren't all hoarded together in this one place.

Stairs wrapped around the foyer to a mezzanine level. Inset in the balcony were matching bronze letters: Ministry of Arcane Science -- Manehattan. Beyond the fountain was a large set of double doors bearing the title: Twilight Sparkle Athenaeum. Above on the mezzanine was a second, nearly identical set of double doors.

M.A.S. Emergency Broadcast Station**Authorized Unicorns Only**

I took a deep breath and stepped towards the stairs. A second pair of elevator doors slid open behind me. I turned to see the grey unicorn mare, Homage, step out and look around. I smiled, trying not to look nervous. “You’re here to see DJ Pon3 too?”

The other unicorn nodded. She was about my size, the only other adult pony I’d seen who was born with a similar small frame. I waved a hoof for her to go first. She was a citizen, after all.

When we reached the landing, the double doors to M.A.S.E.B.S. swung open quietly, making me think of the wild tale of Manehattan ghosts the traveling merchant had told us.

Inside were multiple maneframes and walls of computer screens giving a bird’s eye view of... the vast majority of the Equestrian Wasteland as far as I could tell. Homage clopped past me as I stopped to stare. Searching about, I spotted New Appleloosa on one of them.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Homage asked.

I nodded, noticing that while most screens had clear, sharp images, several flickered and suffered odd distortions, and one large set of screens was dead black. “You’ve been in here before?”

“Oh, a few times.” She walked over to a bank of buttons and lights, raising a hoof to press one. She turned and trotted back towards the center of the room where a microphone was raising from the floor. Homage’s horn glowed and her voice changed by magic.

“Good morning, wastelanders!” Homage cried into the mike, her voice now male and *very* familiar. “How is everypony doing? This is your pal, DJ Pon3 and, well, it’s that time again... that’s right, time for some news!”

I fell to my haunches, staring as the little grey unicorn’s voice belted over the airwaves.

“I hear rumor that Monterey Jack, cheese shop owner up in that oh-so-hoity-toity Tenpony Tower, has been arrested for deciding that being a thieving jack-ass is the appropriate response to an act of kindness. Remember what I keep telling you, my little ponies: treat each other with kindness and respect. Or don’t and watch it come back to bite you in the tail.

“In other news, somepony’s finally arrived to fix my toaster. Hallelujah! It’s breakfast time! Here’s a little Sapphire Shores to get you through the morning.”



Ten minutes later, I stood on the windswept roof of Tenpony Tower as Homage made a refining adjustment to the gemstone set into the center of one of the dishes on the broadcast tower.

I stared out over the grey labyrinth of Manehattan. From here I could see another Ministry Hub building which was considerably worse for wear, Horseshoe Tower, and even The Pony of Friendship out in the harbor. Breathtaking blue oceans stretched out until the waters vanished under offshore fog.

“Irony, isn’t it?” Homage asked, her voice no longer that of DJ Pon3. “I’m told that statue was a gift from the zebra folk generations before the war.”

I turned to look at her but caught sight of something far off on the horizon that grabbed my attention. A needle-like white tower rose all the way into the clouds. I blinked, realizing I’d seen it before, but not over there. Before, when I’d spotted it in the distance, it was...

I turned to look out in the direction I knew the tower should have been and saw. There were two of them. I pulled out my binoculars and slowly turned, scanning the horizon. Far off, protruding from the mountains near old Appleloosa, I thought I spotted a third.

How many of those towers were there?

“I see you’ve spotted them,” Homage said casually.

I lowered the binoculars. “What are they?”

“No idea,” Homage admitted. “Something pre-war and really sophisticated. What I do know is that each one has a station house at the base and observation eyes about a third of the way up. DJ Pon3 managed to hack into one of them. Between those eyes and reports from loyal listeners, every DJ Pon3 since had been able to keep ponies informed about dangers, uplifted by the tales of heroes, and generally apprised of what goes on in the wasteland. And give them beautiful music to help make life out there more bearable.

“It’s all I can do to help everyone. But I figure the most I can do is the least I can do.”

I looked to Homage with amazement bordering on reverence.

“You, on the other hoof, it seems can do a lot more. And so I’d like your help...”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: *How We Do It Down on the Farm* In combat, your critical hits are more devastating. Your damage from critical hits, including Sneak Attack Criticals, is increased by 50%. This does not affect the chance to cause a critical hit.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE VILLAIN OF THE PIECE

"Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts."

Answers.

For weeks, I had been holding onto the illusion that all my questions would be answered if only I could get to Tenpony Tower and talk to DJ Pon3.

Sitting across from Homage at her tiny table, talking over ice-cold Sparkle-Colas, I found myself wondering how I had convinced myself. For instance, she hadn't been able to tell me anything about Red Eye; apparently his operations were in one of the few places she couldn't look. If anything, Homage had more questions than I did. By the time I had finished giving her the inside story on what had really happened at Shattered Hoof and why I had made the choices that I did, the only real revelation was the realization that hanging all your hopes on an assumption was going to get you nothing but hurt.

"Thank you, Littlepip," Homage said, offering me another slice of watermelon fresh from the tin can. "I always tell it to my listeners as accurately as my resources allow me to. You have no idea how grateful I am to have somepony fill in the gaps."

I nodded. "And I'm grateful for the chance to tell my side of the story. My... reputation seems to be getting out of control."

Homage smiled, "Undeservedly?" She pointed a hoof at me. "You might not think of the things you do as anything special, but they are. Simply by treating the way you risk yourself to help others as something anypony would do, you show the wasteland a way to be better."

Homage lifted a slice of centuries-preserved watermelon in her hooves and nibbled at it before continuing. "You're right; that's how ponies *should* treat each other. But in the Equestrian Wasteland, it's rare enough for a pony to be willing to expend valuable ammunition from afar to rescue a stranger, especially when they know that they might need those bullets tomorrow to save themselves or their families. Putting life and limb in danger?"

Homage shook her head sadly. She had a beautiful mane of short blue hair that fell into her face as she did so. I reached up to brush it out of her eyes so she didn't have to put down her watermelon. "I'm afraid the Equestrian Wasteland has no shortage of Monterey Jacks, but faces a crippling lack of Littlepips."



"Why would he do that?" I paced in frustration. The mention of Monterey Jack had derailed the previous conversation. "I just don't understand it."

Homage watched, surprised at my agitation. "Pride would be my guess. From what you've said, he doesn't really seem sorry about what he did."

"It's a stupid law," I asserted with a stomp of my hoof.

Homage didn't seem to agree. "Tenpony Tower has extremely strict laws regarding anything that falls under 'raider activity' to act as a deterrent. Try to remember, we're stuck between the raiders of Shattered Hoof and the slavers of the Fillydelphia Crater. Tenpony

doesn't just want to keep undesirables out, they want to send a clear message to anypony from either group that might think of setting hoof near this place."

Dammit. I hated to admit it, but that made sense. What still didn't make sense to me was why Monterey Jack had confessed. The hope that Monterey Jack would be set free because he hadn't been a *successful* bandit wilted.

I stopped and looked to Homage, "He... he had to have known about..." I felt unsure, like I was grasping at straws. And worse, I felt responsible. As Homage had pointed out early in the conversation, Monterey Jack was the one who tried to rob me, and he was the one who made the damning confession. As far as she saw, I had no reason to feel guilty. But that didn't change how I felt. The moment I had seen Monterey, all the feelings of betrayal flooded back laced with righteous indignation. And I had thrown a tantrum. "Was there any chance he didn't know that they could execute him for... what he admitted?"

Homage shook her head. "Every citizen of Tenpony knows the laws here. Getting permanent residence here takes a lot, and knowing the law is one of the easier requirements to meet." I groaned inwardly, confused and upset. Homage added firmly, "Monterey Jack's had that cheese shop here for five years now, and before that he was a caravan guard for the merchants that the former shop owner got his supplies from. Monterey knows the law."

Dammit.



Homage and I walked together through Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum. Every wall was covered with shelves, save for a couple reading nooks and three large, vaulted windows that allowed cloud-greyed noonday light to spill into the library. Each shelf was filled with tomes, manuals, novels and collected volumes of written works. Every pillar was ringed with more books. There was a large table in the

center, standing not on legs but a ring of bookshelves. Each chair had spaces under the armrests filled with even more books. Under the windows was a bed with neither books nor shelves, one of the scattered pieces of furniture (along with the table, refrigerator, chairs and an old phonograph) that told me this was where Homage had made her home.

“That’s... a lot of books.”

Homage trotted over to the table where an ancient terminal sat, pouring out its green glow through a haze of dust. The pretty grey unicorn poked at it with a hoof and an elegant voice floated out.

“Twilight, darling. We really must get together soon. It’s been ages. And, may I speak honestly? You need a rest. If any pony knows overworking herself, it would be me. Please, why don’t you just take a morning off? Join Fluttershy and myself this week. We’ll even make the trip to Manehattan; no need to come back to Canterlot. I’m sure they have lovely spas in Manehattan too.

“Now, the reason I’m calling on the restricted line: I’ve just heard my Ministry is about to purge the Ponyville Library of ideologically incompatible books, and I knew right away that you’d want to keep them for yourself. So I’m having *this* shipment diverted to you as well. I do hope you have enough room. I know the Ministry of Magic on Ministry Walk has a much bigger library, but we can’t get away with diverting these wagons to *Canterlot*, now can we?

“If you *are* running out of space... now don’t get mad... but you *could* ask Pinkie Pie for help. Her Ministry has a hub in Manehattan too, after all. And she always seems to find enough space for everything. I don’t know how she does it.

“Anyway, I’m sorry to cut this short, but I’ve got to run. The designs for the covers of the revised books are ready, and I just can’t let them go to the printers without making sure each one is perfect.”

I looked from Homage to the shelves with new respect. Not only a lot of books, but a lot of preserved, original versions of books.

Homage glanced up to one of the few walls that were only mostly covered in books. Above the bookshelf was a framed painting (depicting a panoramic view of a desolate valley of dirt and rocks) and sitting on the shelf was a small clock of wood and brass. The big hoof was already halfway between the eight and the one, the small hoof jabbed straight down at the four. "I'm sorry, but I really have to get back to the radio. There are reports to go through, and I have to check if the screens caught anything. But please, feel free to stay here and browse the books until I get back. I'd love to talk some more... if you don't have anyplace pressing to be."

I did not and said as much, although I knew I should probably let my companions know what I was up to. I excused myself, promising to be right back. As I started to leave the Athenaeum, I remembered the records. Turning to Homage, I pulled them out and floated them towards her. She stared with wide eyes, like a birthday pony realizing that one of her presents was just the right size for that toy she had been begging for.

"I found these in one of the Stables," I said, trying not to break into a huge grin at her expression. "I thought you might find a good use for them."

She bounced up and down, letting out a squeal of delight. For the first time since the cheese shop, I felt happy with myself.

Homage's horn glowed as she took possession of the records. "You have no idea how much this means! Not just to me, but to Equestria!"

I was smiling brightly as I rode the elevator back down to my floor.



I was still feeling happy as I trotted up to the door of our suite. But the voices inside stopped me cold.

"...doctor here says he has a treatment that can remedy addictions," Velvet Remedy was claiming. I felt the happiness drain from me, replaced with crossness. Seriously, they were talking about

this? Behind my back? They'd even talked to a *doctor* about it? A stranger, no less?

"What, like jus' givin' Li'lpip a pill?" Calamity's dubious voice erased any question that they were indeed talking about me. "Swallow this an' all yer problems go away?"

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy replied. "First, it's more... involved than that. And will take the better part of the day. Second, Doctor Helpinghoof was clear that the treatment only cleaned the patient's body of the drug and reversed *physical* addiction. The psychological elements of addiction will probably be with Littlepip for the rest of her life. But this will make it a lot easier for her."

I raised my hoof to stomp it in fury. But then set it down, not wanting them to hear. There were so many things wrong with this! First, how dare they?! Second, what addiction? Easier how? I was perfectly fine. I hadn't had a Party-Time Mint-al in what, two days? What kind of addict can say that? And three... "Helpinghoof"? *Really?*

"Ah'm not so sure 'bout this..." Thank you, Calamity. Now tell her to fuck off.

Instead, he neighed, "Li'lpip don't exactly handle feelin's of betrayal well. Ah've seen her reactions to the Stables we've been in..."

"Oh yes. And that's nothing compared to the way she flew off at the cheese shop owner," Velvet Remedy agreed. Perfect. So was that what she was doing when I asked her to look into the laws and Monterey Jack's impending execution? Talking to doctors about problems they're both pretending I have?

"...We'll have to be very careful in how we approach this," Velvet Remedy was continuing with her absurdity. "Even if we can get Littlepip treated, it won't do any good if we lose her because of it. Without friends, who will help her from just taking..."

That was enough. I was headed back to the library. If Velvet Remedy and Calamity didn't know where I was and got worried, well, they deserved it.



Homage was a gracious hostess, which I was especially grateful for since I had no urge to see Velvet Remedy or Calamity anytime soon. The pretty grey unicorn helped me find a few books I was interested in, then left me to read as she disappeared up into the broadcast station.

For the next few hours, I pored over the original editions of the *Big Book of Arcane Sciences* and *Today's Locksmith*, doing comparative readings with the copies I already owned, making notes, and learning quite a lot about both subjects. Apparently, making books “ideologically compatible” also involved removing the sorts of advanced information that could inspire troublemakers. I smiled a little, realizing that the cutie-mark questing activities of my youth would have definitely put me in the “troublemaker” category.

Homage trotted into the Twilight Sparkle Athenaeum a little over two hours later; floating alongside her were the records and an old phonograph that I had spotted before. While I read, she sat and listened to the music, her head bobbing softly to the beats.

Only once was my study interrupted. Homage got about halfway through a rather energetic song (about mending friendships, notably -- the assertion in the chorus that life without friends, quite bluntly, *sucked* struck home pointedly enough that I wasn't able to focus on my reading anyway). Suddenly, Homage stopped the song and restarted it from the beginning. The thought crossed my mind that maybe she was feeling a connection to the lyrics as well, but it was erased with her proclamation:

“Okay, okay. I can't just listen to this song. I have to dance to it.”

I looked up and nodded politely. Then started reading again.

“Oh no,” she stomped. “I'm not going to dance in front of a guest who isn't dancing herself. That would be way too awkward.” The whisper of a thought had barely begun to form in my head when she obliterated it with, “So get up.”

My head shot up, startled. The song didn't really make me feel like dancing, no matter how bizarrely upbeat the music was in connection to the lyrics; and I felt awkwardly shy about displaying my complete lack of dancing skills in front of Homage. But I didn't have it in me to say no to her, especially considering that this library was her home and I had given her this gift.

So... we danced.

And while it was awkward at first, Homage wasn't much of a dancer either, making up for lack of skill with creative vigor. Her smile and energy were infectious, and I found myself letting go. By the end of the song I was really enjoying myself, and I felt a twinge of sadness when the song ended.

The next song was much slower, and for a moment I felt awkward, but I distracted both of us by asking about the painting above the clock.

"That's a painting of Splendid Valley," Homage stated, wiping her hair out of her face.

I lifted an eyebrow. "It doesn't *look* splendid."

"Oh it isn't. It's a terrible place. Makes camping in the Everfree Forest look as inviting as a day at the spa." Homage put a hoof on my shoulder. "Stay well away."

I had never heard of Splendid Valley, much less had any desire to go near there. But that made me wonder, "Why would Twilight Sparkle have a painting of such a place in her library?" I felt marginally foolish for asking -- certainly it wasn't terrible before the war. On the other hoof, it certainly wasn't splendid, or even pretty. It was barren and uninviting. And the painting didn't fit with the rest of the Athenaeum, neither in palette nor in mood. It was like an unwanted visitor.

"There's a Ministry of Magic facility out there," Homage answered.

"Not a hub like this," Homage clarified. "There's a huge network of caves and caverns under Splendid Valley. Early after the Ministry's inception, the M.A.S. cleared the natives out of those caverns and set up a gem mining operation out there. After they had cleaned the valley

of gems, they started using the empty caverns as a disposal site for some of the... by-products of the Ministry's magical experiments."

My mind conjured up images of monsters and grotesqueries. Homage seemed to sense the direction of my imagination and kindly redirected it. "Barrels full of weird magical toxins. In the last months of the war, the Ministry of Magic was apparently retooling the facility for something else, but I don't think they ever finished. Splendid Valley was center of the second megaspell hit. Most ponies... well, those who bother to learn about history at all... believe that Manehattan was the second. But Splendid Valley was hit minutes before."

I made a note to avoid. Weird magical toxins and megaspell radiation probably did not mix well.



The afternoon was bleeding into evening; Homage had returned to the broadcast station to take on the guise of DJ Pon3. This time I followed, watching her transform both in voice and mannerisms as she stepped to the mike.

"...and it's time for another DJ Pon3 pony survival tip. Today I want to talk to you about two of the biggest threats you might stumble across in the Equestrian Wasteland. No, not radigators, bloodwings or even hellhounds. No, children, today I want to talk to you about their mothers. That's right, pull up a chair, cuz it's time for DJ Pon3 to talk to you about the dangers of radiation and taint..."

There was something amazing about watching this equally little unicorn pony become the voice of the Equestrian Wasteland.

"...Magical radiation, as we all know, is a side effect of powerful and wicked magics released violently on Equestria. Naturally, the biggest and worst zones of radiation are found in places like the Fillydelphia Crater, the Manehattan city center... pretty much everywhere the megaspells hit except for Cloudsdale and Canterlot (both of which should be avoided for *other* reasons). But even a recently exploded

skywagon can be radioactive. Fortunately, so long as you always carry your radiation detectors, kids, these places can be avoided.

“The more insidious threat of radiation is that it bleeds into food and water. Always drink purified water whenever you can. Make sure you carry several canteens whenever you travel, and fill them at every safe water supply. Keep a healthy supply of RadAway...”

Most of this I already knew, thanks to the Wasteland Survival Guide, so I was only half-listening. I had to admit that, despite Monterey Jack and the stupidity of my friends, this had been one of the better days of my life. But it was getting late and my anger towards Velvet and Calamity, while still very present, had dulled around the edges. It was time to return to them.

“...Taint, on the other hoof, is a zebra of very different stripes. Nopony knows exactly what the taint is or where it comes from, but we know its mutative effects on monsters and the fatally malignant repercussions on ponies. Remember, folks: taint don’t care what you’re wearing. No protective suit keeps it out. And there’s no cure. Only way to safely tell if a place is tainted is by reputation. Discover one by any other means, it’s probably too late ...”

Sounded to me like the best way to hide something was to stick it in a cave and hang a sign saying “Danger: Taint” outside.

“And in the news, one of the smaller settlements in the Manehattan Ruins, Guttersville, has gone silent. If anypony is traveling through that way, please pop a head in and see what’s going on. Then let your ol’ pal DJ Pon3 know.”

Eventually, DJ Pon3 wrapped up the news with a special announcement:

“Now, I know what all of you are actually wondering: what about that Equestrian heroine from Stable Two? What’s she up to?”

I winced, giving Homage a pleading look. But asking her to tone it down when she was being DJ Pon3 was like asking SteelHooves to take off his armor -- it just wasn’t going to happen.

“Well, I’ve got incredible news: the Stable Dweller loves you! That’s right, all of you! And you know how I know?...”

I was cringing now.

“...because she sent a little toaster repairpony to me with a special delivery. Starting tomorrow, there will be some new songs added to our broadcast. So keep yourselves tuned in, faithful listeners, because you don’t want to be the last pony around to have heard the discs I’ll be spinnin’ for you tomorrow! And now, once again, it’s Sapphire Shores singing that the sun can’t hide forever.”

The glow of DJ Pon3’s horn’s horn faded, and once again I was in the room with Homage.

“Laying it on a little thick aren’t you?”

Homage smiled brightly. “Just telling the truth like I always do.”

I laughed. “Well, except for the whole secret identity gimmick.”

Homage fixed me with a serious look. “Do you think the stuck up ponies of Tenpony Tower like the idea of having a ghoulish sympathizer living in their tower? Much less broadcasting from it? If they knew who I was, then I wouldn’t have the freedom to tell it like it is. In fact, they would probably ban me from the tower altogether.”

“Sometimes,” she said, “being honest means knowing when not to be.”



There were two things left that I wanted to ask Homage, and only one which I could bring myself to voice, so when we returned from the broadcast station I finally brought it up.

“This morning, you said you needed my help?”

Homage blushed. “Well, was kind of hoping you’d risk your life on an errand for me, but it’s a bit ridiculous of me to ask now.”

I raised an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued. “Go ahead.”

The remarkable grey unicorn with the blue mane that kept falling into her eyes seemed to ponder that, then shook her head.

"Tell me," I nudged.

"um... I'd rather not. It's silly now."

"Tell me," I pushed, her refusal making me even more curious.

Maddeningly, she declined.

I stopped a little. "Tell me. Tell me. Tell me!"

Homage waved a hoof. "Okay, okay. Since you really want to know..." She took a deep breath. Then let it all out in a rush. "I want you to get some new songs for me. Specific songs. I know that Sweetie Belle was really close with the other two founders of Stable-Tec, one of whom was Scootaloo. And Scootaloo also founded Red Racer, whose office and factory is right here in Manehattan. I came across information a few years ago that told me Scootaloo's office safe should still contain a few demos for music that have never been heard before. I've been wanting to get them and listen to them ever since. But I can't because it's really dangerous. The place is just lousy with manticores."

Wow. Okay, yes, I could definitely see why Homage would consider that a silly request, considering the records. And she didn't even know about Velvet Remedy yet.

Which reminded me that I had to return to Velvet Remedy and Calamity, the friends who had been skulking around behind my back, and tell them I had no better idea what to do next than I had before we got here. I needed a distraction. And, really, it was for a good cause. Not to mention I really wanted to see Homage's face light up again.

"Okay. I'll do it."

Homage was staring at the floor, digging at it with her hoof. At my words, her head shot up, staring at me with disbelief. "W-why?" she stammered.

I considered trying to make my reasoning sound more noble, or falsifying it all together. But a bigger part of me felt that lies had no place in DJ Pon3's domain. So instead, I told her, "Because I have no idea what to do next. And my companions are expecting me to come back with a plan. And, really, because you asked me to." Gilding my words just a little, I added, "I would love to do Homage a favor."

She blinked. "Okay, did you miss the part about the manticores?"

I chuckled. "No. But I've gotten a few new weapons since the last time we fought one. I think we can manage. And don't worry," I added, not wanting her to feel guilty, "if it looks too dangerous, we'll back out."

Homage nodded firmly, accepting this. Which caused her hair to fall into her face again. "Okay. But if you're going to do something that risky for me, you're not doing it without a reward. And I know just the thing!"

I cocked my head, not really looking for a reward and ready to decline her offer, but too curious to refuse without hearing it.

"I've heard that your friend Calamity has been asking around for a flux regulator. Well, I just happen to have one."



I wasn't sure I really wanted us to have a flux regulator. The idea of traveling around in a pegasus-pulled bomb had dubious appeal.

Before returning to my companions, I made one other stop. I suspected Velvet Remedy had been less than diligent in pursuing the situation with Monterey Jack (considering she'd been seeing doctors about me instead), but I knew I should give her the benefit of the doubt. And from what I had learned myself, Velvet Remedy may have hit a wall very early.

On either hoof, I needed to talk to Monterey Jack myself before making further plans, especially if those plans were going to amount to

leaving him to his fate. Unfortunately, the Tenpony Tower constables weren't about to let a little non-citizen like me anywhere near him.

Not a problem.

A blast of mint flavor later, and the world exploded to vivid lucidity. Talking my way past the guardbucks was easy. I was a charming, intelligent mare; even if I had no interest in them, they naturally had interest in me. I was even able to talk one of them into giving me his pencil and clipboard. Which was great, because now that my mind was freed from its natural sluggishness, I was having *ideas!*

The flux regulator was going to be an astounding benefit. After finishing up business in Tenpony Tower, we would go back and fix up the Sky Bandit. Maybe take a trip back home to Junction R-7 for a little equipment maintenance and inventory housekeeping. Then we should be able to go straight to Fillydelphia, bypassing all the dangers along the way...

"What do you want?" The sour voice of Monterey Jack cut through my preoccupation with my Party-Time-enhanced brilliance. I looked up to find him standing in a bed of moldy hay at the back of an iron-barred cell.

I refocused on where I was and why I was here. Staring at the unpleasant beige stallion, I cut to the chase, "Why in Celestia's name did you admit what you'd done? You knew you'd be jailed and probably killed for it."

Monterey Jack fixed me with a cool stare. And finally, as if speaking to a child, "Because the Equestrian Wasteland demands sacrifices. You haven't been out here long enough to get that..." He looked me over. "But I'm guessing you've started to. Not the innocent little filly you were just three weeks ago, are you? You've killed. And not just monsters, you've killed other ponies. Tell me, when you stepped out of that Stable, were you a killer?"

I stepped back, shocked. I had no idea what this had to do with anything, but I knew what he was saying. I saw it in the way Velvet

Remedy looked at me, like I was flank-deep in blood. The way I saw myself in dark times and bad dreams.

"I know you've looted corpses. How about stealing from raiders or other ponies who are so bad, who the wasteland's made so twisted and mean that it's easy to justify pretty much anything you do to them? How about stealing from those who it is harder to justify taking from... or is it just easy now to take from everypony?" Monterey Jack's words stirred up memories of breaking into Silver Bell's barn.

"You betrayed anypony yet? Left anypony to die just to save your own skin? Killed an innocent yet because it was the only way to protect you and your own?" He stared at me, reading the revulsion in my eyes. "No? How about lesser things. Ever just walked away?"

My mind flashed to the blue pony being chased down by her rapists. But that didn't count! We'd saved her life. Calamity had even brought her healing potions. It wasn't as if we just left her to her fate. We helped! ...and then we left her. Velvet Remedy, I realized with PTM-laced insight, would never have let us walk away without seeing the girl safely home had she not been traumatized by the sight of Calamity slaying the colt. But why didn't *I* insist that? What was wrong with me?

Monterey Jack was waiting. The only response I managed was a nod. I wasn't nodding to any of his questions specifically, but that I followed what he was saying.

"The Equestrian Wasteland demands sacrifices. It makes you whittle away bits of yourself until you can't recognize you anymore. So you find a virtue. You find something in yourself that you believe in, that you do not compromise. Ever. And as long as you can keep that part of you, that one good thing, then you can bear to look at yourself in the mirror each morning. It becomes your anchor, the thing that lets you live with yourself.

"My virtue, my anchor, is that I'm an honest pony. I keep to my word. I have never cheated a customer. I do not lie. And as long as I can look at myself and know that I'm still an honest pony, then I can

bear everything I've ever had to do to provide a safe place for my filly and colts."

"But..." I stared at him, not wanting to understand. "You could have said nothing!"

He glared, "For how long? I come back, and you're all over the damn radio. My children listen every day for news of your Celestia-damned heroism. They idolize the fuck out of you. And every day, I know that I've met their idol and I tried to rob her. And I keep silent, but a lie of omission is still a lie. And that poison has been killing me as surely as any noose."

Eyes narrowing, he leaned his muzzle against the bars, as close to me as he could get. "Don't think I spoke up for you. I spoke up to save *me*. Even if it kills me."

I backed up. I wasn't sure if Monterey Jack was cracked, foolish... or terribly, horribly sane. I turned to go.

As I moved out through the door, he called out after me. "If you haven't found your own virtue yet, you best hurry up. While there's still anything left of you to save."



I was still running on the awesomeness of Party-Time Mint-als when I finally returned to the others. So convincing them to join me in a hunt for music had been a breeze. (I had been concerned about a confrontation; but when I arrived, Velvet Remedy was lost in the Flutteryshy Orb, giving me a chance to talk to the others first.) Calamity was in the moment I mentioned the flux regulator. I phrased it to Velvet Remedy as a chance to impress DJ Pon3 and maybe get to record some of her own music. She reminded me that she was a medical pony now, not some Stable's songbird, but it was a half-hearted reluctance that I was able to overcome by suggesting this would allow her beautiful music to fly free. SteelHooves took no persuasion at all, neither eager nor reluctant.

The Red Racer factory was nowhere near either the Luna or Celestia Lines, so within half an hour, we were walking through the urban blight of the Manehattan Ruins. The crash from the Mint-als was worse than before, and the only thing that kept me from chomping another one was a promise to myself that I would the moment we got to Red Racer. I couldn't fight like this, stupid and half-blind. I needed that edge. And if I took another one now, I ran the risk of crashing in the middle of combat. I couldn't risk that.

I dropped back to walk alongside SteelHooves, noticing how Calamity and Velvet Remedy unconsciously changed their paces to put distance between each other. I rolled my eyes. They were bad enough before. Depression was setting in, and their stupid silent fight wasn't helping.

"So... why are you still with us?" I asked SteelHooves in what I hoped was not a blunt or discouraging tone. "You escorted us to Tenpony Tower already."

"Do you want me to leave?" the deep voice spoke from within the Steel Ranger's armor.

I waved a hoof. "No, no, I didn't say that. I just... I like to know why a pony like yourself would continue to travel with me."

"Maybe I have nothing better to do."

I stared ahead, not believing that at all. Why would he lie though? It seemed like all my companions were on the edge of turning on me. Was I being paranoid? Or was SteelHooves a threat?

Buried in dark contemplation, I didn't notice that the others ahead of me had stopped. I bumped into Calamity's backside, scraping his barding with my horn.

"Hey. Why...?" I started to ask, annoyed, but the words fell away from my mouth as my eyes were drawn to a large poster on a freestanding, crumbled wall.

The poster was of a pegasus fully encased in sleek black armor. The armor looked fearsome, almost insectoid. The battle saddle looked like

an onyx carapace with two antennae jutting out, tips crackling with magical green energy. Like SteelHooves, even the pegasus' tail was protected by segmented armor; but unlike Steel Ranger armor, this tail also served as a weapon, ending in a vicious, glowing spike. I felt I was seeing a nightmare version of Steel Ranger armor. Beneath the pegasus, who hovered in a most threatening stance, were scattered zebras, dead or fleeing.

FEAR NOT, EQUESTRIA!

WE WILL SAVE YOU!

Calamity finally nickered, scoffing. "That's right. One day, the Grand Pegasus Enclave will come swoopin' down outta the skies t' rescue all y'all little ponies. Maybe after they're done with their naps."

He leaned close and whispered loudly. "Don't hold yer breath. Never. Gonna. Happen."

"Calamity...?" Velvet Remedy began, seeming to forget she was mad at him.

Turning away from the poster in disgust, he began trotting off. "Lazy. Arrogant. It's like they took the greatest of us, stripped away everything t'was good an' admirable 'till they were left with nothin' but her flaws, and decided 'hey, let's go with that!'"



"I think we're being followed," SteelHooves announced as we passed through a broken courtyard, approaching a towering building black and half-eaten by the apocalyptic blast. I was staring at my PipBuck's automapping spell; the Red Racer factory should be directly in front of us. At the Steel Ranger's words, I turned around, eyes moving to my E.F.S. compass, more confident in it than my own eyesight in the waning light.

The courtyard was covered in wind-blown litter; scraggly grass burst through cracks in the grey stonework. I looked out past the platform that formed the centerpiece of the courtyard; a platform that had once

boasted statues of several ponies. The statues had shattered and crumbled; now only the hooves of the ponies remained, sticking grotesquely up from the surface of the dais. I turned, taking in a full view of our surroundings until I was looking back at SteelHooves and the inferno-torn building that towered above us. But neither I nor my Eyes-Forward Sparkle detected anything. This time.

I was certain SteelHooves was right. Several times earlier I'd spotted it too, something which was probably a small miracle with how murky all my senses felt. But no, there was somepony or something hovering on the edge of the Sparkle's ability to detect. The light on my compass labeled it as non-hostile, leaving me to wonder if it was keeping its distance out of shyness, or because it comprehended the limits of my Stable-Tec arcano-technology.

As if on cue, a notice flashed across the upper edge of my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I had discovered "Hoofbeats". I turned back to look at the building again, eyeing it with surprise. I knew what this skyscraper had once been: this was the Ministry of Morale's Manehattan hub. I'd seen it from the roof of Tenpony Tower. Yet sure enough, the façade before us proclaimed itself (in sheer audacity of style as well as neon lettering) to be the center of loud, musical urban rebellion.

Unlike the Ministry of Magic's local hub, the Ministry of Morale didn't announce itself with signs along the Celestia Line or even a name in small font somewhere on the wall. It was a nameless, faceless skyscraper. Unassumingly monolithic from the third floor up. The first two floors, however, were dedicated to what I had already come to think of as one of Manehattan's most popular dance clubs (remembering Velvet Remedy's passing acknowledgement that Pinkie Pie and Vinyl Scratch had performed music together at Hoofbeats at least once.) Even my PipBuck didn't label it as a Ministry hub, as if it was a secret... but one that everypony already knew.

In its time, the Ministry of Magic's hub had been exactly what I expected of a Ministry building, down to the insane magical defenses that protected it from the balefire bomb. From the MoM hub's

apparent lack of defenses to its perch atop a public party-house, this was assuredly not.

I walked forward, drawn to the gaping, shattered-glass front of Hoofbeats. I tried to imagine it full of ponies, dancing to that song which Velvet Remedy had started to sing on stage at Shattered Hoof. As I trotted past Calamity and Velvet, a red light appeared on my E.F.S. and then a second. And a third. I stopped, waving for them to hold back. Crouching down, I moved along the front of Hoofbeats until I reached the corner where the sidewalk was littered with the burnt metal husks of magazine venders.

Several more dots appeared as I peeked cautiously around the corner.

Did you miss the part about the manticores?

The Red Racer factory was literally right across a back alley from Hoofbeats. The red and orange bulks of manticores roamed all over the facility. I watched as several took off from a terrace twelve stories up and began to circle the building before one-by-one landing on new perches. There were two of them in the back alley alone, one had its back to me, its tail inches from my muzzle. The other was digging through a trash bin further down.

I cringed back around the corner and shot the others a distressed expression. They all stared back at me expectantly. It was mere luck that there weren't any in the courtyard. I suspected I now knew what had happened to the pony statues.

Luna guide me. Now what? Think. Think...

What I needed was another Party-Time Mint-al. I was sure that with just a chew, the burst of reasoning and perception would solve the problem. But after the behavior of my companions, I couldn't risk them seeing me take another. They wouldn't understand.

I turned away, trying to block their view as I activated my PipBuck's inventory arrangement spell and then floated the tin out. I kept my head down and hoped the light from my horn wasn't bright enough for

them to notice in the odd grey twilight of dusk. I levitated one PTM out and sucked it greedily into my mouth.

As expected, the taste was delicious and I had no more than swallowed, slipping the tin away, when the grey film was pulled from my eyes and the world was so much brighter and better. I took another peek around the corner, even more cautiously this time. The manticore had not seemed to move. Even its tail was in almost the same position. His companion dropped down from the trash bin and wandered over to the next.

I looked up into the sky. I was smart enough to handle two manticores. No problem. But even like this, I couldn't possibly handle the whole herd. I had considered having Calamity fly us up to one of the ledges, but the manticores could fly too. They were heavy, lumbering creatures, and never seemed to fly very high, but...

My eye caught something red in the sky above. Something that wasn't a manticore. Not at all.

Red Racer was a factory that made, amongst other things, scooters. It was, from what I could tell, best known for its little red scooters. And clearly Red Racer was quite proud of them, for the factory had once been adorned by a gigantic red scooter over ten yards long. The giant, symbolic scooter was no longer perched on its rooftop scaffolding. The scaffolding had rusted and collapsed; the scooter had fallen and gotten wedged between the Ministry of Morale and the Red Racer factory about fifteen stories up.

Creating a bridge.

I knew how to get into the Red Racer factory.



"You really are crazy," SteelHooves finally commented after hearing the plan. Velvet Remedy was giving me looks, as if staring at me hard enough would explain to her the change in my mood.

“That there’s a might big and unstable-lookin’ buildin’, Li’lpip. Ah think maybe we best split into pairs t’ try an’ find the best way up. Otherwise, it’ll take us forever.”

I agreed. Not only did I want to move swiftly so that my PTM wouldn’t wear off before we got up and across, I really didn’t think the floors in that building should be stressed with the weight of more than two of us at a time. Especially when one of those was SteelHooves.

“I’ll go with SteelHooves. I’m the lightest, and I can use levitation when necessary.”

Velvet Remedy took one look at Calamity and interjected, “No! I... I should go with you and SteelHooves should go with Calamity. He flies. No weight at all.”

Calamity nickered and rolled his eyes. “Whatever ya want, princess. So, Ranger, fancy a bit o’ scavenging?”

“Not as long as you’re carrying,” SteelHooves stated plainly and followed Calamity through one of the nearly glassless frames of Hoofbeats. Velvet Remedy stuck her nose in the air, pairing up with me as we followed.

As we stepped into the darkness, Velvet Remedy focused, lighting up her horn. The first thing I noticed was a gumball machine. The gumballs inside had melted and boiled, and were now a solid block inside the warped housing.

The center arena of Hoofbeats was three stories of mezzanines over a dance floor that took up most of the basement. The musician’s platform had once been hung from the ceiling by cables. Now it lay at a wild tilt, one end smashed through the dance floor like a ship beginning to sink.

“Is it bad that I’m jealous of this place and the ponies who got to perform here?” Velvet Remedy asked me as we passed under rows of hanging speakers, each larger than a full-grown stallion. “Or that I feel so upset to see it destroyed like this?”

I shook my head. “Just because your dream is to be a medical pony doesn’t mean you didn’t love singing any less.” Somehow, I just knew the words were right. It must have been the insight and social graces that PTMs granted a pony, for I wasn’t sure I could have understood what was bothering her on my own. “You’re not cheating on your dreams or your freedom to long to sing.”

Velvet Remedy paused. Then whinnied, smiling. “Thank you, Littlepip.”

I smiled back, sidestepping a charred skeleton. Then stopped, looking at it. Unlike the streets outside, where the ponies were vaporized in a flash, the ones in here were burned alive. I winced, trying not to imagine rushing flames tearing through the dance club, a flood of fire. I realized that the Ministry of Morale hub must have had protections of its own, but just not as magically strong as those around the Ministry run by Twilight Sparkle. They must have held just a moment, probably only for an eye-blink, before they failed. The inferno that consumed this place was no less final a holocaust



The balefire bomb the zebras set off in the heart of Manehattan was detonated in the late morning. The population of Hoofbeats was probably at its lowest ebb for the whole day. The same could not be said for the Ministry above. I focused my own magic to plow a path through the blackened pony skeletons that covered much of the floors.

Red dots speckled my E.F.S. compass. Foolishly, my first thought was of the ghosts that the merchant pony with the mechanical owl had told us about. In a way, I wasn’t entirely far off.

“Who?” demanded the little robot owl as it soared into the hallway. I froze. Not in fear but utter astonishment. Hostile robot security owls? Really?

The mechanical owl opened its beak, and a thin line of pink magical energy sliced the air, striking a smoke-blackened vase on a magazine

counter next to me. The vase flew backwards, glowing fiercely pink, and disintegrated into a fine glowing ash before it could hit the floor.

So yes, really.

I heard Calamity's battle saddle firing somewhere else on the floor. I slid my combat shotgun from its holster, floating the muzzle towards the mechanical bird and nearly shot Velvet Remedy as she charged in front of me, spearing the metal creature through with her horn.

I felt myself trembling -- caught between panic, relief and anger -- as Velvet Remedy drew up to a halt, her eyes locked on the now inert robot impaled on her horn. She shook her head, trying to dislodge it.

"Littlepip?" she finally said, sounding desperate and looking comical. "A little help please?"

"Only. If you promise. Not to run. In front of a loaded gun again."

She stopped, looking at me with that dead robot owl on her horn, her eyes wide as her gaze fell on my floating shotgun. "Oh dear."

"Oh dear indeed," I said grimly even though my anger was bleeding away. I wrapped the skewered owl with my magic and pulled it free. I wanted to be mad, but she just looked so cute like that.



Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

The bullet tore through the first owl, setting its internal components on fire as it went. Two more passed harmlessly through the air, impacting the kitchen wall beyond with flashes of flame. As the mechanical guardian fell, I switched targets with the practiced perfection of S.A.T.S. Pulling the trigger again, I sent three more bullets at the second owl.

A razor line of pink struck my back, burning painfully, but mercifully not turning me into fine pink dust. Without even waiting to see the second mechanical owl fall, I glided the barrel around to point at the one behind me and telekinetically pulled the trigger again. Three

bullets, a foosh of flame, and the third owl fell to the floor ablaze. The air smelled of ozone, burning wiring and bubbling robotic innards.

Exhausted, the targeting spell fell away. I looked around, but I had gotten all of them. I checked the clip on the zebra rifle.

I was quickly using up the armor-piercing ammo that the zebra rifle could use. The weapon didn't seem to have the ability to shoot just one bullet at a time, and it only took one to punch through these creatures. I needed to change weapons, but the combat shotgun had already proven too inaccurate at the ranges I preferred to engage these creatures at. They were easy to kill, but their magical energy weapons had a chance, even if slim, of disintegrating anything they hit. I didn't want them to get close enough to have a good shot.

I suspected Little Macintosh had more than enough power to punch through the metal skin of these things without using armor-piercing ammunition. Which was good since Little Macintosh was the only weapon that I didn't have armor-piercing ammo for. (Other than the dart gun, which was completely useless against these little things.)

Switching weapons, I started towards the wall of refrigerators, intent on finding out what goodies the Ministry of Morale had packed with an eternity's worth of preservatives on this floor. Every other floor of the MoM hub had a kitchen, even if it was just a small one. There were more kitchens than bathrooms, which I couldn't imagine was logistically sane. And some floors like this one were nothing but kitchen. The posters on the walls in here were all brown and flaking, or burned away entirely, but the ones that were just a little readable had me convinced that Pinkie Pie actually made a government industry out of churning out birthday parties for good little fillies and colts. *You were good this year, Littlepip. (Trust us, we know!) So here's your cake, sent straight from the Ministry of Morale. With a birthday card signed by Pinkie Pie herself!*

What I imagined was ridiculous and impossible, but I somehow also believed it was actually true.

Velvet Remedy stopped me, insisting on looking at the wound on my back before letting me move another yard. So I sat onto my haunches and stared longingly at the first refrigerator door.

“You and Calamity,” Velvet Remedy tut-tutted. “When I dreamed of being a medical pony, it was to spend my life helping ponies. Multiple. Not just two, over and over again.”

“You could always just let me OW!” I flinched as she pressed something that stung onto the burn before pouring a pleasantly cool gel over it.

“There, it will be good as new in no time. A little pink, maybe, and it may take a few days for your coat to grow back, but it won’t scar.” Not like the line left on my neck, she meant.



“...and just trying to get him to take a bath is like trying to shove an apple through the eye of a needle...” Once Velvet Remedy had gotten onto the topic of Calamity, she just didn’t stop. I wanted to cover my ears with my hooves, but I couldn’t do that and walk. At least her voice had dropped now, made more timid by the hallway’s décor.

We had made it up to one of the many floors that had been dedicated to sifting through the massive amounts of intelligence garnered through having tapped into every “private” conversation transmitted by arcano-technology like the terminals. The Ministry of Morale had been listening.

All along the dark corridor were smoke-blackened posters of Pinkie Pie. They were watching us, the eyes seeming to follow us as we moved. The bold word “FOREVER” glared from the bottom of each poster.

Creepiest. Most disturbing. Hallway. Ever!

I floated out one of the cupcakes we had found in the fridge and took a bite. It was a little stale, but still surprisingly edible after two

centuries. Whoever had made them was either a goddess of cooking, or a very dark enchantress.

“...shoots without thinking. Like he shot the dragon before we could even try to talk to it. Like how he shot *you*...”

I was still ignoring her as we reached the end of the hall. Left, right or through the doors ahead? I felt myself beginning to come down from the Party-Time Mint-als. First chance I got, I was taking another. I really couldn't risk crashing in someplace so dark and... freaky. Or, for that matter, around Velvet Remedy when she was being such a...

“Whoa!”

I'd pushed open the doors, and found myself staring into the sky. An office room three times the size of a Stable Atrium spanned out in front of us, filled with rows and rows of desks with terminals, then dropped away into empty space. The sun was just moving down below the cloud-cover, painting the sky an apocalyptic orange. I'd somehow forgotten half the building was gone.

For the first time in weeks, I was hit by massive, crippling vertigo. I'd become accustomed to the hugeness of outside, but to have it suddenly and unexpectedly thrown in my face awoke the agoraphobic filly inside me. Carefully, shaking slightly, I closed the door.



“...could actually like a brute like him?” Velvet Remedy stopped for a breath. I thanked Celestia for the moment of quiet, viciously praying that she could send Velvet Remedy's voice on a lunar vacation.

By my estimation, we were a floor above where the scooter had gotten caught. Collapsed stairwells had forced us to ascend higher and now we were looking for a way back down.

“It's just that he makes me so... so... mad,” Velvet Remedy burst out with a stomp. So much for the power of prayer. “You know, I really think I should reconsider my options. There's plenty of other stallions in the Equestrian Wasteland...”

I felt a pang of jealousy. Started digging a hole to bury it in.

“...Or,” Velvet Remedy said with a sudden sweetness. I froze. I could feel her breath on my left ear. When had she gotten so close? With a sultry voice as smooth as melted chocolate, she suggested, “Or maybe a mare?”

I felt my knees go weak. My heart skipped a beat. My insides became flushed with heat and my stomach filled with butterflies.

Then cold hard reality crashed over me, dousing the heat and killing the butterflies with frost. I turned on her, instantly and coldly furious.

“NO.”

Velvet Remedy took a surprised step back.

“No. You are too perceptive to *not* know I have a crush on you.” I stepped forward, my voice cold and sharp. “You do not get to play with my heart, offer me what I’ve yearned for, just to try to get back at Calamity.”

Velvet Remedy backed up, ears back, stammering.

“For the Goddesses’ sake, Remedy!” I barked. “You are a follower of Fluttershy. *You don’t get to be that evil.*”

Velvet Remedy’s eyes were wide. Her ears were pasted back against her skull and she was cringing from me.

Good.

I turned and walked away, not wanting to look at her again. I left her still standing back there as I turned the corner. Something was tearing apart inside me and I didn’t want to let her see it.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” called out a voice that sounded disturbingly like a mechanical Pinkie Pie. “You’ve been a bad pony!”

A sprite-bot’s grill glowed an angry reddish-pink and it aimed its magical energy weapon at me.



“Where are they all coming from?” cried out Velvet Remedy as five more sprite-bots rounded the doorway and started vaporizing our barricade of tables and refrigerators.

I knew the answer, but I didn’t have time to explain it aloud. It was obvious, really. Before there was Watcher watching everyone, there was Pinkie Pie. Of *course* the sprite-bots were hers. I imagined them floating along the streets of pre-war Ponyville, Appleloosa, Manehattan... ubiquitous. Everywhere. Bobbing along playing cheerful tuba music and all the other happy little nonsense songs that they played. Little ambassadors of good cheer from the Ministry of Morale. Little spies.

I fired off shot after shot, ducking down only to reload. The waves were coming faster now, and there were enough of them that my targeting spell was draining before I could finish them all off. Fortunately, they were easy targets. They didn’t seem to understand evasion.

The clarity of PTMs had faded away, leaving my brain sluggish. Every moment not spent aiming and firing was spent hoping for a chance to eat another Mint-al. But with Velvet Remedy crouching right next to me, there was no way to do so. I was still coldly angry with her, and the last thing I wanted to do was give her the satisfaction of seeing something she would interpret as proof she was right.

I did have to wonder why this floor though.

Four more swooped in through the shattered window. I threw a refrigerator at them. Three were crushed by it. The fourth one was knocked away. Beside me, Velvet fired her needler pistol over and over at it. She was a bad shot, but finally hit it. The needle bounced off the armored bot harmlessly.

The bot returned fire, slicing through her mane.

“Fine,” she bristled with lady-like resolution. I was surprised to feel the combat shotgun float out of its holder. “Let’s try this one.”

BLAM!!

The sprite-bot exploded in a shower of sparks.



The office had, at some point, actually been quite nice. A huge window gave what would once have been a panoramic view of Manehattan. The window was shattered inward, the frame ringed with jagged glass teeth. Four safes, blistered but intact, were built into the wall beside the window. There was a melted desk in front of it.

In the far corner was a small half-kitchen. On the counter, a terminal gave off a soft pink glow. I had never seen one before which didn't glow that sickly apple-green. The casing was warped and charred, and it took some of the special tools I had retrieved from Stable Twenty-Nine just to interface with it, but the screen was still readable.

In the other far corner of the room, opposite the kitchen, was another blackened skeleton of a pony. I was just sitting down to try my hoof at hacking the terminal when I noticed it, and something buried within the bones.

Curious, I got up and trotted over. What I had glimpsed was a spot of color, clean, unmarred by the balefire that engulfed this place. Looking closer, I could see a statuette amongst the long dead pony's ribcage. A young purple unicorn with pink and violet stripes in her lavender hair. Twilight Sparkle.

Gingerly, I floated the statuette out of the ribcage and took a closer look. Immediately, I felt a strange wash of clarity that pushed away the cloud that had settled over my brain. The sensation was nowhere near as powerful as eating a Party-Time Mint-al, nor as flavorful... but I couldn't deny that it felt *cleaner* somehow.

On the base of the statuette: "Be Smart"

Smiling a little, I slipped the statuette away and returned my attention to the terminal.

This one was beyond my skill. Not even with the new tricks of the trade that I had learned from comparative reading was I able to crack it.

"Littlepip..." Velvet Remedy started, approaching me gingerly as I gave up in disgust. "...please, about before..."

I stared at her warningly. "Look, just don't talk about it." Biting back a harsher retort, "In fact, why don't you go stand outside for a little while. I need some fresh air."

I could see her deflate a little more at that. She nodded, saying no more, and walked into the office outside the strangely cupcake-shaped door.

The moment the door swung shut, I floated out my Party-Time Mint-als and swallowed one. I went for the safes first, picking each one easily. And to my joy, the contents of the third safe held dozens of tins of Party-Time Mint-als! I was actually feeling even happier about the find than the two StealthBucks I found in the fourth.

Then I turned my attention to the defiant terminal as my mind soared to new heights of intellect. It took four more times, forcing me to repeatedly back out of the system before it locked down. But I finally got it. I let out a whoop!

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy's voice sounded through the door -- timid, cautious.

My shoulders slumped. I sighed. Getting up from the terminal, I walked over to the door and opened it. "Okay, look. I know you're sorry. And that you didn't mean it. But it doesn't change the fact that you tried to do it. And that's not going to stop hurting anytime soon."

She nodded, tears in her eyes. I felt bad. Why did I feel bad?

I closed my eyes and sighed again. I was seeing the situation more clearly now. Even though I didn't want to. Party-Time Mint-als were an equal-opportunity revealer. "And for what it's worth, I get it. I know what it's like to put your faith in what you believe something to be rather than what something actually is." I looked for an example

that didn't reveal that I had gained effectively no insight from DJ Pon3. I didn't want to admit that yet. And fortunately, it didn't take much for me to find an even better example.

"When I stepped into the outside, I was completely lost. I didn't understand any of it. The only thing I understood was Stables. Or, at least, that's what I assumed. In reality, the only thing I understood was Stable Two. And when the other Stables didn't live up to my expectations, I... couldn't handle it well." I kicked at the floor, stirring up ash. "Hell, it didn't even take all the bizarre and fucked-up social experiments... I get upset when the *architecture* isn't ri... isn't the same. Isn't what *I* think is right."

Velvet Remedy was staring down at me thoughtfully.

"When something, or somepony, doesn't live up to your assumptions of who he is, then you either have to accept that you didn't know him as well as you thought you did, and strive to get to know the real him better... or you start, well..."

"Doing what I'm doing now?" Velvet Remedy offered.

"Yeah." I smiled at her. Then rolled my eyes, "And I am totally the wrong pony to be giving this advice when I can't even manage it myself."

"Thank you, Littlepip," Velvet said earnestly as I disappeared back through the cupcake door to look at the terminal once again.



There was only one retrievable bit of data on the terminal. An audio message:

"Hi Twilight. It's me ...

"I've tried sending messages to you at both your Canterlot office and the one here. Everypony says that you are in Splendid Valley again, so now I'm trying you there too. I really hope you're not just avoiding me. I... I wouldn't blame you if you were."

The voice was anxious, sad and cracked. I knew Pinkie Pie's voice; I'd heard it in Vinyl Scratch's memory. This was almost the same, but much more fragile. Possibly even broken.

"I went to the get-together at Spike's place and brought It just like you asked. All of my friends were there but you... Spike said it was because you couldn't get away from your work, but... Was it because I was gonna be there?

"Twilight, I'm so sorry. You were right. Totally right. I've known it for a long time. I just...

"I can't.

"I mean, I couldn't. But I will. I've made an appointment at the Helpinghoof Clinic. For tomorrow. They're supposed to have stuff there... medicine that can help make... addictions... go away.

"Do you think they might be able to bake the medicine into a cake? Or maybe a pie? I like pie!"

On the recording I heard the sound of a knock and a door opening. A second voice interrupted.

"Miss Pinkie Pie? The Ministry of Wartime Technology has sent us a dozen Steel Rangers. They're in position with our agents."

Again Pinkie Pie spoke, but addressing the intruding pony. She didn't bother to edit the recorder; she just let it keep recording.

"ooh, those Four Stars ponies are some bad ponies! They need to be banished. Then locked up in the place they were banished to. But first we need to get their secrets from their bad, bad pony heads to make sure there aren't any more of them. So tell my ponies that we want them alive...

"OH! I know! Have them go in with one of my Pinkie Balloons!"

The intruding pony seemed unsure, taken aback by this suggestion.

"Miss? You want us to raid Four Stars using a... giant blimp shaped like your head?"

"uh huh! I want them to know I'm coming for them!"

I couldn't keep my mind from envisioning a giant pink balloon with the same staring face as the one on the gigantic billboard. I wasn't sure if that was ingenious or insane.

On the audio recording, I heard the click of the door closing. Pinkie Pie returned to addressing her (former?) friend, Twilight Sparkle.

"Sorry about that. You... wouldn't believe what's been going on. But don't worry. If we get through today, everything will be okay.

"After today, I can do what you wanted me to do. I can try to be your Pinkie Pie again. I'm sorry I haven't before... but I just couldn't. I know you won't believe me but... try to remember the parasprites.

"I've done bad things, Twilight. Awful things. And I've let the ponies in my Ministry do even worse things. And I'm really, really sorry. I don't know if I can be your Pinkie Pie again. But I'll try. That's a Pinkie Pie Promise!

"I...

"Party-Time Mint-als are bad. They mess ponies up. I know I'm messed up. More than ever. But I've needed them. Normal old Pinkie Pie is smart and she can sense when things are coming. But Party-Time Mint-als make me... more. Not better. I know that now. But... more. And we need more. Equestria needs more.

"On Party-Time Mint-als, my Pinkie Sense is way, way more Sense-y. And it's the only thing keeping us a hoof ahead of really, really bad things. My nose has been burning all day. It's like an itchy nose only way, way worse. There are bad ponies, Twilight, and they mean to hurt us. To hurt all of Equestria. And just normal Pinkie Pie can't stop them...

"But after today, it'll all be okay again. I just know it. Just have to get through today...

"...And tomorrow, I've got that appointment. And... and...

"And Twilight? Do you think... maybe... you could go with me? I'm... kinda scared. And it isn't the sort of scared that goes away with giggling.

"I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway. But it's not the same. I want the real Twilight Sparkle. I...

"I want my friend back.

"Please?

"I'll do anything..."

The recording ended. I sat there stunned. There was a whirlwind of thoughts in my head, but none of them quite came into focus.

Party-Time Mint-als mess ponies up.

Pinkie Pie herself said that. But she also said they made her... more. I knew that was true; they were making *me* more right now.

Pinkie Pie had wanted to be rid of them. But she couldn't. Not just because she was addicted, but because she had become reliant on the boost in order to do her job. To try to save the lives of millions of ponies. How could that not be more important than one friendship?

The Equestrian Wasteland requires sacrifices.

The audio recording had an attachment:

Error. Connection to Maripony terminal #42 failed. Message not sent.
--

Twilight Sparkle had never received Pinkie Pie's last call.

I have you with me now...

My eyes fell on the pony skeleton from which I had retrieved the Twilight Sparkle statuette. A sadness welled up in me. I felt tears falling down my cheeks.

"Celestia and Luna be with you, Pinkie Pie," I said, not knowing what else to say.



The sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the clouds above with streaks of pink and purple. Twilight colors.

Calamity and SteelHooves were already waiting for us when Velvet Remedy and I reached the floor below and found where the front end of the oversized Red Racer scooter had lodged tightly into what had once been the frame of a huge window, canted slightly. The massive red model groaned in the wind.

“Oh yes. This looks safe,” SteelHooves commented.

Velvet Remedy had pulled up when she saw Calamity, staring at him until he looked back, then averting her gaze.

“Okay, I think this time Velvet Remedy and Calamity should go together,” I suggested firmly. They had things they needed to talk about, and the sooner they did, the better for them and for me. “I’ll go with SteelHooves and help levitate him across the scooter.”

The sky above was growing perceptibly darker. We needed to hurry. I stepped up to the ledge and made the mistake of looking down. Massive, paralyzing vertigo hit me. We were fourteen stories above the alley. The tiny red dots of manticores spotted the ground far, far below. Another flew through the alley about halfway between me and them. I felt cold sweat break out across my forehead.

I didn’t think I could do this!

“No offense, but I don’t want you levitating me, kid. You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“Change of plan,” Calamity announced. “Li’lpip, get back from the ledge. Catch yer breath. Velvet, you go first. Don’t worry,” he added, seeing her fearful expression. “Ah’ll be here t’ catch ya if y’all fall. Li’lpip, when yer ready, use yer levitation t’ help lighten SteelHooves’ load. After that, Ah’ll fly ya across.”

We all agreed. Once away from the ledge, I felt much better.

Velvet Remedy went first, testing the scooter. It vibrated slightly in the wind, it groaned alarmingly as she made it halfway, but it held. For a moment I wondered why Calamity didn’t just fly her across too. But I realized that there was no way he could carry SteelHooves. And it was

better to have somepony lighter cross first, with Calamity waiting to swoop in, than to subject the scooter to Mister Heavy Pony right off.

Velvet Remedy jumped off of the back end of the scooter which stuck up about a pony's height from the Red Racer terrace it had fallen against. She smiled weakly and gave a little wave. I waved back. That's when I first noticed them.

I spotted the broken scaffolding that had once held the giant Red Racer scooter several floors above. Nesting within it were the dark, leathery shapes of bloodwings. The sun had sunk fully beneath the horizon, the light was vanishing from the sky, and they were beginning to move.

I levitated out the zebra rifle, thinking that if I could shoot them while they were all nested together, the fire might take out the whole nest. But SteelHooves was stepping onto the scooter; it let out a bone-shaking whine of protest and I turned my focus on wrapping him in a telekinetic cocoon, negating the weight of his packs and armor. He probably weighed less than I did now.

The first bloodwing spread out its wings and took to the air, hunting for prey.

Calamity shot it. The form lurched in mid-flight, then dropped gracefully from the sky. The report sent all the other bloodwings fluttering into the air!

Calamity swooped, firing again, and another fell. But two more angled towards him, sensing dinner. The pegasus spun about in the air and flew, drawing them away from us.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I split my focus between firing the zebra rifle and keeping most of SteelHooves' weight off the scooter. Focusing on two different tasks wasn't like lifting two objects, but I could do it -- just not easily. And I couldn't use the targeting spell without losing my grip on the Steel Ranger.

Most of my shots missed.

I could hear the boom of gunfire from Velvet Remedy's position. She still had my combat shotgun, and with her second shot one of the bloodwings exploded in gore. I saw another flapping high into the air above her. A curving trail of smoke rushed up to meet it, SteelHooves' missile exploding on impact. The leathery wings fluttered downward; no sign remained of the body they had once been attached to.

With a thud, my view of the battle was consumed by the face of a bloodwing as it landed on the tip of the Red Racer scooter and snapped at me with dagger like fangs. Unable to see him, I lost my grip on SteelHooves. The scooter gave a painful howl of metal scraping concrete.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I missed. It was right in front of my face, I could smell its rancid breath, and I missed!

The bloodwing curled in its wings, pushing through the window as it bit at me. I felt the huge bat-creature collide with me, the foulness of its stench making me choke. Its blood-seeking fangs scraped against my armor, trying to sink in.

I heard a shot from Calamity, and the bloodwing let out an ear-rending screech. It backed out of the window, looking for its attacker, and flowers of blood blossomed from two holes in its head as Calamity fired again.

"Figured ya might be wantin' a spot o' help there, partner!" Calamity called out, tipping his hat as he flew by. Now four bloodwings were chasing him!

SteelHooves had just made it across. I stared at the scooter. It had shifted from SteelHooves' weight. It looked even less stable than before. But, Calamity was busy; I had to do this myself.

"You can do this," I told myself aloud. "It was *your* plan."

I stepped out onto the scooter, my leg shaking weakly.



I was halfway across, drenched in sweat, moving an inch at a time, when the bloodwing swooped down at me. I swung the zebra rifle up at my attacker and pulled the trigger.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

The bloodwing screeched, bursting into flame. My eyes widened as the burning bat hurtled right at me. Breaking into a panicked gallop, I raced for the end of the scooter.

The burning corpse of the bloodwing slammed into the scooter behind me, dislodging it from the Ministry of Morale window with a terrifying squeal.

I felt the bridge I was racing across lurch away beneath my hooves, leaving me in freefall.

Wrapping myself in my own magic, I tried to push myself forward, adding to my momentum.

By Luna's grace, I was diving towards a window rather than a concrete wall. And, because the Equestrian Wasteland hated me, it was one of the only windows in the entire Red Racer factory with a still-mostly-intact pane of glass.

Glass slashed at me, my body erupting in points of fresh pain, as I crashed through and landed hard, bouncing off a table and crashing through several chairs. Everything went black.



When I came to, I was in the remains of a conference room. My whole body ached. I was several floors separated from my friends. Enough time had passed for the Party-Time Mint-al to wear off.

And a manticore was sniffing at me.

I moaned. I tried to push myself to my hooves, but it was too hard. I wondered what it would feel like to be eaten. And if the manticore would sting me first.

The manticore leaned down and bit into my mane. Then lifted me up by it and started carrying me like a kitten. It hurt, the back of my neck and scalp burning, but I was hurting too much everywhere else to protest.

The manticore turned and started walking out a hole in the wall. I spotted my zebra rifle amongst the splintered chairs and focused, floating it to me. The manticore either didn't notice or didn't know well enough to care.

I realized I could just shoot it; but it was taking me someplace, and I was curious where. (I needed to go someplace myself, and with any luck it would be the same someplace. Either way, as much as being carried by my mane hurt, I didn't want to walk anywhere either.) Two floors later, I found out as the manticore stepped out of a stairwell onto a balcony that overlooked the factory floor. Little, normal-sized red scooters were scattered everywhere in various states of assembly. Between the decayed conveyor belts and ancient, dilapidated machinery, somepony had set up cages. Many of them were filled with ponies. Most were filled with horrifically bloated, twisted and deformed corpses that used to be ponies. The sight of them twisted my stomach and stabbed through my heart.

Manticores moved freely between the cages like guard dogs.

My captor leaned over the edge of the balcony and opened its mouth, dropping me through the open ceiling of one of the cages. I landed in a thin layer of hay with a heavy, painful thump.

Gingerly, I accessed the inventory-sorting spell in my PipBuck and floated out the extra-strength restoration potion I had pocketed back in Stable Twenty-Nine. I drank greedily, and rested as my body began to mend.

"No way," I whispered as I looked at the cell across from me, on the other side of a conveyor belt full of scooter wheels. Inside was a familiar-looking sea-blue mare. I whimpered. This couldn't be happening.

She spotted me. Which really wasn't surprising given my entrance. "Hey!" She pushed herself to her hooves and waved at me through the bars of her cage, whispering loudly. "It's you!"

I looked up sorrowfully and nodded. "I'm sorry! This is my fault. I should have stayed with you. Seen you safely home."

The blue pony looked about fearfully. "No. He was waiting for me there."

He? He who?

"He took everypony in Gutterville," she hissed fearfully. "Rounded us up with these monsters of his." She looked me over. "You still have your guns! When he comes back, you have to kill him!"

My mind was fogged from post-Mint-al depression and stupidity. I raced to catch up. "Who? What?" And finally, "Why?"

"The doctor. He's torturing us to death!" she told me urgently. "He says he's experimenting on us! He takes a pony back into that other room, and then they scream awful, horrible screams. And when he brings them back, most of them are dead. The lucky ones are. Some are still breathing and feeling, but not for long. Their bodies are all twisted and wrong."

Celestia have mercy.

I stood up, looking down the rows of cages. Dozens of pony faces stared back at me, most with expressions of horror and despair. Some looked to me hopefully. Other ponies looked at me with pity and a heartbreaking acceptance that soon they would die, desecrated and screaming, and there was nothing to be done about it. Two ponies stared at nothing, their minds unable to deal with what was happening in here.

Not while I was still breathing!

The manticore, this doctor's "monster", had put me in a cage. Cages couldn't hold me. And it had left me with my weapons. I focused, lifting first the zebra rifle and then the poison dart gun, floating one to

each side of me. I hadn't been prepared for mechanical owls or swarms of sprite-bots or bloodwings. But I had planned for manticores. The bars just made this easier. The only way they could get at me was above.

I slid into S.A.T.S. I'd never used two weapons like this before, but how hard could it be? The poison from a manticore's tail was paralyzing to ponies, fatal with enough of a dose. I didn't know if the manticores had any immunity to their own sting; if not, the poison should slow them at least. Bullets enchanted with fire should do the rest.

I reloaded the clip on the zebra rifle and began to choose targets.



Picking the lock to my cell would definitely have been easier without the dead manticore in the cage with me. But I managed.

That manticore had been the only one to land inside my cell before I could kill it. The poisoned darts did no more to the manticores than to the sprite-bots and owls, so I had tossed it aside for Little Macintosh. The manticore had managed to rake me rather badly, leaving several bloody gashes across my breast, before Little Macintosh filled it full of noisy death.

The dart gun and the zebra rifle were quiet. Little Macintosh was loud. But then, burning manticores were loud too. The factory was now filled with smoke and the smell of cooked manticore meat.

My cell door swung open and I rushed to the sea-blue mare's cell, working the lock as fast as I could without breaking a bobby pin. "This time, I'll see you home," I promised. But first, "Where's this so-called doctor's lab?"

She pointed the way. But I didn't go until I had opened the lock of every cell that held a living pony. I encouraged those who seemed more mentally fit to help the ponies who didn't have the ability to leave their

cells on their own. I stalwartly prevented myself from looking too long or too closely at the dead ones.

“Everypony stay in here. I’ll be right back, and then I’m getting you all out of this place and back to...” I looked to the sea-blue pony and she mouthed the name of her village, “Gutterville.”

With that, I crouched down and begin to move towards the lab. As soon as I’d left the factory floor, I activated one of the StealthBucks. This doctor wasn’t going to see me coming.



I slid past another manticore, making a mental note of where it was so I could kill it after dealing with the doctor. I didn’t want to make any more noise now than I already had.

At the end of the hall, I could see the double doors that lead to what had once been the Red Racer factory’s on-site emergency clinic. (What did that say about the original factory’s safety levels?) Light poured through the little square windows on the doors and between the cracks.

Cautiously, I nudged the door open, being as quiet as possible, and slipped inside.

The rotting form of a ghoul earth pony in a lab coat was puttering around tables of chemistry sets and medical equipment. Several medical beds lined one wall, stained darkly with what was probably not just blood. On the farthest one, a brown earth pony lay strapped, eyes wide and dead, a huge bubble having malignantly grown out of his chest. In the center of the room were the corpses of flayed-open manticores. They looked like they had been dissected. Along one wall hung dozens of manticore tails. In the far corner, barrels were stacked two-ponies high. Each bore a yellow, diamond-shaped label with dark purple warning symbols.

Toxic Magical Byproduct.

Property of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

DO NOT TOUCH, BREATHE *or* STARE AT.

"No, no," the ghoul doctor muttered to himself. "I'm so close. That last batch almost worked. What am I missing?"

He trotted over to a terminal, looking over screens of data. Then turned towards the pile of dead manticores. "Look at you. You look exactly the same as you did before the bombs..."

Except, I was guessing, not so dead and autopsied.

"...Radiation doesn't touch you. *Taint* doesn't harm you. You're the perfect creatures."

I floated Little Macintosh out. Ghoul doc wasn't a sadistic raider type; he was totally cracked. I hesitated to shoot, letting him finish his disturbed rant. I wanted to know what these ponies had died so horribly for. Even if I knew it wouldn't make any sense.

The doctor stopped, staring at the end of one of the tables. Amongst the clipboards and hot plates sat a memory orb. He reached out and touched it, rolling it under his hoof. Then turned away. "I know the secret is in your poison," he announced to the flayed manticore bodies. "I just haven't perfected the formula yet. A few more tweaks, a few more tests... But I will crack this!"

He spun to the dead buck on the medical bed. Trotting up to him, the doctor whispered encouragingly, "Won't be long now. Every pony is going to remember you. All of you. And, most of all, me. We're going to give the ponies of Equestria the cure for Taint! I think I'll call it Taint-Away..." He paused, as if the pony corpse had responded. "No, you're right, that's a silly name."

Stepping back, he waved a hoof at the corpse, smiling. "No, no, not at all. No need to thank me. I was happy to let you do your part!"

Good. Goddess. Celestia.

The doctor paused in a moment of revelation. "I'm going to need more ponies."



Curiosity got the better of me. I was invisible, and this psychopath wasn't going to hurt anypony else right away. I figured I had time.

I moved to the far table, lowered my horn, and focused on the memory orb. The real world fell away from me...



...replaced by a luxurious office. Trophies lined the shelves. A much smaller oversized model of a Red Racer scooter hung from the ceiling. Everything had an odd reddish tint to it, and my view kept bobbing and tilting, making me seasick.

Behind a large desk crafted from dark wood stood an older mare with an orange coat and purple hair that showed the first solid streaks of grey. "Anything yet?" The voice was damningly familiar.

"Just one so far," came a voice not from me but from near me. I suddenly realized that this memory was distinctly and terrifyingly different. I could see and hear, but I couldn't feel or smell or taste. I had no sense of a body at all.

My perspective suddenly tilted crazily, leaving me looking at the ceiling. Then it righted itself again. Much more of this and I would vomit, possibly giving away my position. But I was locked in the memory until it was over. I realized I had made a grievous tactical error.

I was bobbing towards a bookshelf. Then I was staring at the wall above it through the haze of red. Slowly my view pivoted until I was looking into the face of a stern white unicorn with scarlet hair and a matching scarlet glow around her horn. She stared right into me. Then her horn stopped glowing and the red haze vanished, leaving the room in sharp and perfect color. The unicorn trotted across the room, her horn beginning to glow again as she scanned over the furniture on the far side. When her horn passed near one of the lamps, there was a gleam of brilliant pink from it. The pink gleam flashed with the sound of a popping balloon and was gone.

"This is the last one, Miss Scootaloo. Your room is clean of any Ministry of Morale snooping," the unicorn said. "Shall I send them in now?"

Scootaloo nodded, grimacing. "Please. My friends have been waiting long enough." She watched the unicorn walk out of the office then looked around with a sigh. Her gaze caught me.

"Oh, Peek-a-Boo!" she called out after the unicorn. "You left your..." Her voice trailed off with a sigh, "...Sparkle-Cola."

I was a Sparkle-Cola? No, wait... I was a spy device planted inside a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. Scootaloo trotted over to me, leaning up and grasping what I now assumed was the top of a cola bottle, lifted it, and carried me over to her waste basket. My vision twisted weirdly as I fell, landing face up amongst her trash. She stared at me through the circle of the waste basket, then trotted out of sight.

I heard the door open. All I could see was the ceiling.

"Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, it's so good to see you two. I mean, you have no idea!" Scootaloo said, sounding relieved. Then a tenseness crept into her voice. "You weren't followed, were you? No pony saw you?"

"Good to see ya too," Apple Bloom said with a bit of cheer. "And no, we were careful. But do ya really think it's a good idea to have a *secret meeting* a block away from the Ministry of Morale?"

"You know, I chose this place thinking they would never expect anypony to plan something right under their noses. But Peek-a-Boo found two more Ministry bugs in my office just before you got here."

"Who's Peek-a-Boo?" asked the sweet voice of Sweetie Belle.

"Head Pony of my personal security," Scootaloo answered. Then stomped, "I *hate* this!"

"Scoots?"

Scootaloo growled with frustration. "I hate all this hiding and sneaking around. It's not fun anymore!"

“It was never *fun*,” commented Apple Bloom.

“No. You’re right. It’s *sick*.” Scootaloo stomped partially into view, waving her hoof towards her office window. “We’re having clandestine meetings, creating new types of dual encryption, lurking about in unfinished Stables just to be able to talk freely to each other. These are the ponies I respect the most, two of them are *your sisters*, and we have to *hide* from them to get anything done!”

“Hey now, nothin’ wrong with Applejack!”

“Rarity’s... just under pressure.”

Scootaloo sounded like she spit her bit. “Okay, granted, Applejack hasn’t really done anything bad. And I’m proud to say that Rainbow Dash is still good too. But the others? Pinkie Pie? And really, Sweetie Bell... the *Ministry of Image*? What. The. *FUCK!*”

“Stop talking about my sister like that,” Sweetie Belle asked with an edge of warning in her voice.

“Yeah. We all know the score. No need t’ rub it.” Apple Bloom suggested, “Let’s talk ‘bout somethin’ else.”

“Like the Manehattan Stables,” Sweetie Belle prompted. “I hear you’ve started sending ponies into them already...”

“Yeah, or why you keep changin’ the designs t’ my Stables.”

Scootaloo sighed. “We’ve been over this, Apple Bloom. We have to sometimes change the Stable layout and features to accommodate the Experiments.”

“But my designs were perfect!” complained Apple Bloom.

“Exactly,” retorted the purple-haired orange pony. “Your designs are always perfect. That’s why everypony uses them. Your designs have single-hoofedly put terminals in every household...”

“pfft. The terminals were an early design. PipBucks are *much* better.”

“...But,” Scootaloo persisted, “Every Stable can’t be perfect. Not for the Experiments to work.”

“But why not?”

Scootaloo groaned, walking out of sight. Apple Bloom followed her, moving into view. I only saw part of her head, but she was a pretty, pale yellow pony with a brilliant rose mane. I guessed she was the same age as the orange mare.

“I mean, I know that if we ever have to use the Stables, it’s important t’ make sure ponies don’t jus’ make the same mistakes after they get out. But it’s just as important t’ make sure they *get out*, right? So why change a design meant t’ optimize the chances of that? I just... I don’t get why...” Apple Bloom glanced down at me. “...hey, when didja started drinkin’ Sparkle-Cola again?”

I couldn’t tell if Scootaloo was annoyed or thankful for the change of topic. “I haven’t. You know I can’t touch the stuff after hearing about that accident at the plant. That was Peek-a-Boo’s.”

“oh,” Apple Bloom said, looking away. “An’ what is this ‘bout you callin’ ponies into the Manehattan Stables already. The Omega Protocols ain’t been activated yet.”

“I... well, you know how things are headed. Do you really think that we’ll get much warning when they do? Enough for an evacuation?”

Sweetie Belle answered. “No.”

“And... okay, I’ll be honest. I’ve begun to have second thoughts about some of the Experiments, especially in the Manehattan Stables. They’re... risky,” Scootaloo admitted heavily. “I’d like to do a dry run, just to make sure there aren’t any problems before the real thing.”

Apple Bloom cocked her head. “But... won’t that tell everypony what we’re up to? That will ruin the Experiments.” She didn’t sound like she wanted that any more than Scootaloo did.

“I know,” Scootaloo stomped morosely. “So we’ll keep the Manehattan ponies in their Stables until the threat of this war is over. After that, it won’t matter anymore.”

"I... don't think I can spin that," said Sweetie Belle cautiously. "They'll see us as evil ponies experimenting on helpless captives. How can we justify that if it turns out it wasn't needed after all?"

"Don't worry," Scootaloo said solemnly. "I've arranged things so you two are in the clear. It will all look like my idea." With a humorless chuckle, she noted, "Really, it kinda was anyway."

"Scoots..."

"Yeah, we can't let you do that."

A hoof hit the desk with enough force to shake the trash basket. (I was now staring at a wrapper from Cupcake Emporium.)

"Yes you can. Because you have to," Scootaloo's tone was fierce and, I suspected, on the verge of crying. "We can't let this happen again. Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie... all of them. I love them too. But this thing they've created is out of control. And it's hurting everypony. And I can't let it happen again. *Ever!*"

"This isn't our Equestria anymore! It's not the happy, safe, pleasant world any of us grew up in. I don't understand how it could have gotten this way. H-how... how it c-c-could have gotten this bad! Somepony needs to figure it out! And fix it! And... and... and..."

"And if I have to become the villain of the piece to do that, then I will."



Reality reasserted itself without forewarning. And I immediately knew I was in trouble. The memory had been far longer than the others. The invisibility spell had worn off. At some point, I had simply appeared in the room, transfixed by the memory orb.

Now I was on the medical table, bound in chains. My weapons had been removed and stashed, probably nearby but still out of sight. I was

still wearing my armored utility barding. It was soaked in blood from the slashes across my chest and I was woozy from loss of blood.

The ghoul doctor trotted up to me. “Oh hello there? Back with me now? Good. Don’t worry, you’re going to help a lot of ponies...”

The doctor leaned out of sight then returned with a syringe in his mouth. He stared down at me.

And continued to stare.

And kept staring, frozen in place, until the sea-blue mare walked up, my poison dart gun in her mouth, and tipped the paralyzed doctor over with a nudge of her hoof.

I gave her a thankful look.

She turned, looked down, and started stomping furiously on the ghoul doctor. I heard the skull crack and splinter. The pony seemed to be taking out all her hurt and rage on the ghoul, stomping and stomping and stomping long after he must have been dead.

It took me time to float out my screwdriver and a bobby pin and unlock each of my chains. They were easy locks, but I was wounded and alarmingly lightheaded. I broke three bobby pins before I was through. All that time, the sea-blue pony slammed her hooves down on what was now more paste than a body.

She didn’t stop until I wrapped her in a hug and held her.



I sat on a ledge, overlooking the depressing town of Guttersville as the early morning sun broke over the city. Below, Velvet Remedy was caring for the ponies we had helped back here. Calamity and SteelHooves had been discussing possible defenses that could be added around the collection of hovels. Calamity was explaining now about the turret array we’d put together back at Junction R-7.

I had met up with my friends in the Red Racer factory about half an hour after the death of the ghoul doctor. They had managed to find

the safe that DJ Pon3 was interested in, but had no way of unlocking it. Instead, SteelHooves had blown apart the entire wall around the safe and had been dragging it around behind himself with a harness. Calamity had looted everything else.

Inside were two demo recordings. “Hush Now, Quiet Now (Manhattan Never Sleeps Rendition)” by Sweetie Belle, and a song called “Sing It” by the Cutie Mark Crusaders. I hoped that Homage liked her prize.

Watcher floated silently next to me. After the Ministry of Morale hub, I wasn’t sure I would ever see those little sprite-bots the same way again.

“It’s not enough, is it?” I asked, breaking the silence. “Knowing your virtue, I mean.” I remembered Watcher’s list of Great Virtues of Ponykind. But those virtues, I’d come to realize, weren’t great on their own; I had seen dark, stunted versions of many of them. Pinkie/Silver Bell’s mirthless, sorrow-born laughter. Gawd’s loyalty only to contract and coin. Monterey’s honesty out of desperate self-image. I’d almost collected a set.

“No,” Watcher replied in that toneless, mechanical voice which Watcher hid behind. “There’s a... spark that’s needed. Without it, a virtue isn’t anything special.”

“What’s the spark?” I asked forlornly. I didn’t even know my virtue. Now I needed a spark too?

“Friendship,” Watcher said simply.

I looked up at the floating spritebot, the shifting of position making the bandages on my breast rub. “Friendship?” I turned to watch Velvet Remedy bandage the leg of a pink stallion. I saw Calamity laughing good-naturedly at something SteelHooves had said. Friendship.

I *had* friendship. I felt a pang of joy as the acceptance of that cut through the petty jealousy and creeping paranoia that had threatened to overwhelm me. *I had friends.*

“You could say I’ve made a study of the subject,” Watcher admitted. Then, before I could ask, a static pop heralded Watcher’s disappearance. The sprite-bot floated away on tambourine music.



Homage smiled, floating the two demos away from me. “Thank you. All of you. DJ Pon3 has been waiting to hear these for a long time. He can’t tell you how much he appreciates this.”

“Well, he could start by telling us himself,” SteelHooves suggested dourly.

“Sorry,” Homage apologized. “He’s very busy preparing the next news segment. But he sent me to make sure you knew how thrilled he is. And to give you this.”

Homage’s horn glowed as she guided the flux regulator to rest at Calamity’s hooves.

“Aww,” intoned Velvet Remedy with clear disappointment. “I was hoping to meet him. And sing for him.”

I flinched, realizing I hadn’t mentioned that to Homage yet. The pretty grey unicorn shot me a questioning look. “um... tomorrow,” I stammered. “I’m sure DJ Pon3 will have time for us tomorrow. And it has been such a loooong day, do any of us really want to meet him without getting some rest first?” I swallowed, looking hopefully to the others. “And a bath?”

That sealed it for Velvet Remedy, who nodded primly. “Oh, right! Whatever was I thinking?”

“And don’t you want to give that... thing,” I pointed to the arcane device as I spoke to Calamity, “a good look-over before we go anywhere?”

“Ayep.”

I looked to SteelHooves. I had nothing. But he seemed to get the hint and turned to leave. “Coming with us, Littlepip?”

"Um... I'll catch up," I offered, needing to hang back at least long enough to pitch the idea of Velvet Remedy's music to Homage.

My friends walked into the elevator and turned around. Velvet was smiling to me, letting me know once again how thankful she was for our talk earlier, and for my forgiveness. Calamity gave me a tip of his hat.

The doors slid closed. The elevator began to descend, taking them down towards our suite.

"Thank you, Stable Dweller," Homage said softly. "And not just for the demos. I've already heard from Guttersville."

Remembering Watcher's trick when we first met, I felt a pang. "Did you... know?"

But Homage's eyes went innocently wide. "No. If I did, I would have told you. Because if I had known, and had told you, I know you would have gone in just to help them."

I nodded and smiled gratefully. I wish everypony treated me like Homage.

"So, Velvet Remedy... she any good."

I grinned. "The best. Direct descendant from Sweetie Belle." That caught Homage's attention. "And she's not only inherited the skill, I think she's surpassed it."

"Well, then this I've *got* to hear."

I poked my hoof at the floor, thoughts of Velvet Remedy filling me with melancholy. There was something I hadn't had the courage to ask before. And now my heart was aching to know. "Homage... can I ask *you* a favor?"

"Sure," the grey unicorn smiled brightly. "What, have a request?"

I took a deep breath. This was going to be humiliating. But Homage had eyes almost everywhere. If anyone could find anything for me, it was her. "You watch all over Equestria... the parts you can see. Have

you ever spotted a mare out there who... well... who might like me?" I closed my eyes, almost drowning in embarrassment. "I mean, a mare who *likes mares* who might like a mare like me?"

Every second Homage was quiet felt like an anvil falling on my head. Followed by a hay cart. Followed by a piano.

"I might..." Homage said cautiously.

I sagged, feeling both relieved but mortified. "Then... could you point me in the right direction? Tell me where?"

I felt a hoof gently touch my shoulder.

"Littlepip, I said *I* might."

I turned to look at her, not comprehending. Then, looking into her eyes, I felt a spark of understanding. "oh...." I blinked. Her expression softened... sensuously...

The spark ignited into a fire. "OH!"

Homage smiled beautifully.

Thank you, Celestia!

Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Science has reached 100%

New Perk: Action Filly (level two) You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



UNNATURAL CAUSES

“That job had strange written all over it.”

Hope.

Finally, I had found another mare whom I respected and admired, and who respected (and maybe even admired) me in return. One who was attracted to mares, and who I could believe was at least a little physically attracted to me. We weren't in love; we barely knew each other... but there was the possibility of love. There was, in a word, hope.

The last sixteen hours had made for a very long day. As much as I would have loved to spend the next several hours with Homage, she had realized straight away that I was in no shape for anything but sleep. So she had sent me off back to my suite, where Velvet Remedy had puttered and tsked about my wounds until I had fallen into a dreamless sleep out of sheer exhaustion.

I woke up very late in the morning, hungry... and for more than just food. Velvet Remedy had already awoken and disappeared to the shops to get the best caps for everything Calamity had decided to swipe from

the ruins of the Red Racer factory and the Ministry of Morale hub. Most of what Velvet and I had scavenged was intended for our own use -- food and ammo, mostly, as well as the poison glands I cut out of the manticores.

After what she had been through, I had decided to allow the sea-blue pony to keep my poisoned dart gun. I had everything needed to create another once we returned home. Calamity had seen to the purchase of a workstation (currently very disassembled) which he would install at Junction R-7 when we arrived. Which, thanks to the part needed to repair the *Sky Bandit*, shouldn't be more than a few days.

I wasn't about to leave until I had the chance to spend... quality time with Homage.

Out of more than curiosity, I tuned my PipBuck to DJ Pon3's station and listened to the music playing while I cleaned and groomed myself. Homage had already begun to integrate the new music into DJ Pon3's playlists. That unusually upbeat song about mending friendships which Homage and I had danced to was playing while I cleaned my teeth and tried to work all the tangles out of my mane and tail.

"Hoo-RAH!" DJ Pon3's voice thundered over the airwaves as the song ended. "Celestia and Luna bless us, we have *NEW MUSIC!*"

"And with that new music comes some new News! Ready for this? Last night, our Wasteland Savior..."

My telekinesis imploded, dropping everything I was floating.

"...that kid from Stable Two, found and rescued the good folks of Guttersville! And what horror did she save them from, you ask? A psychotic ghoul scientist who was performing experiments with Taint and who had bred himself a small army of manticores! That, folks, is what they mean by crushing two radroaches with one hoof: she not only saved the lives of over two dozen ponies, but she solved Manehattan's manticore problem too!"

I dropped my head into the sink, letting out a whimpering sigh. My reputation was totally out of control. I barely heard the door to the suite open as I anguished over what ponies would be thinking and expecting of me now. Part of me swore Homage just liked making me squirm.

“Hell, you see the kid, tell her to stop by and visit. Ol’ DJ Pon3 wants t’ give her a big kiss for that one!”

My head shot up, catching my horn painfully on the faucet. “Ow!”

“You do know there are more civilized ways to get a drink of water than slurping it out of the sink, right?” Velvet Remedy’s voice rang out from the other room.

Wincing, I touched my horn, looking at myself in the mirror, then turned to Velvet. She was pulling a small red wagon behind her, loaded with supplies and dresses. I stared at the rather fancy and elegant gowns.

“I thought we would want to look our best for DJ Pon3,” she stated simply. Crap. I’d forgotten about Velvet Remedy’s impending audition. “Don’t worry. I know your size. I’ve wrapped you in bandages often enough that I ought to.”

I felt myself blushing.

Velvet Remedy floated a pair of dresses, both simple yet graceful, towards me. “They’ll look perfect on you. Trust me. The one on the right will really bring out your eyes. The one on the left will beautifully complement your mane and tail.”

“Which one should I wear, then?”

“Up to you. Or, if you want to be mysterious, both. Find an excuse to step out, and change halfway through the evening.” Velvet Remedy smiled brightly. “Go on, take them. A girl can never have too many dresses.”

I nodded, floating them to my bed with care. Then jumped and gave Velvet Remedy a hug. “Thank you!”

“Oh, think nothing of it, dear,” she whinnied kindly.

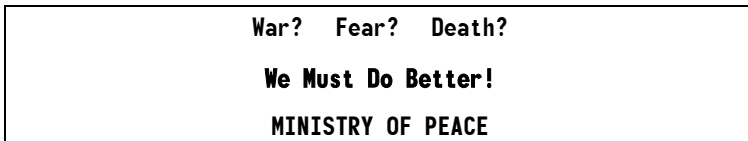


Velvet Remedy was expecting to meet DJ Pon3.

I needed to talk with Homage and find out how she wanted to handle this. If Homage was willing to reveal herself to me, trusting me with such a big secret, then it stood to reason she would be equally willing in regard to my friends. Part of me, however, didn't want her to. I wanted it to remain our little secret -- just Homage and I. Something special between us. I wanted her not to want to trust any other pony, not even Velvet Remedy, with such a gift. It was a selfish thought; I knew I should be ashamed of myself for having it. But I consoled myself that this was Homage's secret to tell or keep, so the fact that I was keeping it from my friends was an act of virtue.

On the way to the elevator, I passed a poster. Pinkie Pie, it insisted, was still watching me. *FOREVER*.

On the opposite wall was a poster of Fluttershy. This time, not modeling for Sparkle-Cola, but an actual poster for her own Ministry:



We must do better. We should be better. I should be better.

I understood why Velvet Remedy loved that yellow pegasus pony. If only there had been more like her, then the Equestrian Wasteland may never have been.

I was still contemplating the poster when Homage stepped out of the elevator. Her face brightened as she spotted me. “Ah. Just the toaster repairpony I was looking for.”

I would never live that down.

“Homage,” I breathed, feeling my heart flutter a bit as I fully drank in the fact that this pretty grey unicorn with the vibrant blue mane actually had feelings for me. Possibly romantic feelings. Or, at least, she was willing to entertain the idea of them. That alone was more than I’d ever had from a mare before. And from a mare whom I really liked. And who was cute too!

“Yes?” she said playfully, making me stammer.

“I...um... I, that is we... When and how did you want to do the thing at the place?”

“The thing at the place?”

I waves a hoof in flustered exasperation. “You know. Velvet Remedy? DJ Pon3? Recording her music?”

“Oh!” Homage grinned. “*That* thing at *that* place. You trust her, right? The ponies of Tenpony Tower know of me as DJ Pon3’s errand girl, but I really can’t let it get out that I’m a bit closer to him than that. She can keep a secret?”

Part of me hated sharing the truth about Homage, but it would be wrong not to. “Forever.”



“*You* are DJ Pon3?”

Homage smiled, clearly enjoying Velvet Remedy’s disbelief.

Velvet Remedy had made herself up gorgeously and donned one of her new dresses, a stunning purple number, all with the intention of making a breathtaking first impression. Now she was shooting me cross glances.

“I’ve got a whole recording studio in here, so the recording will be as good as you are,” Homage said, stepping between us as she spoke to Velvet. I found myself staring at Homage’s flanks, covered with a silky silver dress that sparkled as it clung so tightly to...

Velvet was looking at me. She'd caught me staring, and the little smile on her face made my heart sink. I'd be lucky if the rest of our travels weren't to a soundtrack of "Littlepip and Homage sitting in an appletree."

Homage gave Velvet Remedy a much abbreviated tour, skipping the roof and the Athenaeum altogether but showing off the small recording studio that exited off the M.A.S.E.B.S. Velvet looked like she was in heaven. No matter how much she protested, no matter how much she longed to be a medical pony, the only one Velvet could hope to convince that she didn't get unparalleled joy from singing was Velvet herself.

As Velvet Remedy entered the studio chamber, Homage turned her attention to the recording equipment, waving her horn over a desk of switches and dials. Rows of colorful lights lit up in response. I was left to sit in a corner and watch the show.

Velvet Remedy approached the microphone. "Sound check? Do you hear me clearly, DJ... what should I call you?"

"Homage, when we're together," the grey unicorn replied.

I felt a completely irrational twinge of jealousy at the mention of them and "together." I clopped my forehead. Such feelings were as unbecoming as they were ridiculous. "Stop being a silly pony, Littlepip!" I whispered to myself under my breath.

"This is an amazing setup, Homage," Velvet admired. Then almost too casually, she asked, "Would you happen to have a workbench anywhere around here?"

Homage looked up from the recording desk. "Yes? Why?"

"Oh good. Littlepip has a project, and she needs a private workspace," Velvet Remedy claimed. Now I felt really stupid for having felt that involuntary twinge; even on the verge of giving a performance that would be heard Equestria-wide, Velvet Remedy was thinking about helping me.

"I suspect the project will take her *all night*," Velvet purred conspiratorially. "It's all right if she spends the night with you, isn't it?"

Solar-flaring orgasms of Celestia!

"Oh, I'd love the chance to..." purred Homage back, "... entertain her for a night."

I was doomed.

"Ready when you are."

Velvet Remedy's horn began to glow. The recording chamber filled with colorful light and rich, electric music. Homage was struck with awe. I smiled, knowing the impact of a Velvet Remedy performance.

"Music is my remedy..."



Four hours later, Homage and I strolled the mall of Tenpony Tower. Velvet Remedy had been amazing. At her insistence, Homage had let Velvet perform each song multiple times, making sure she had the best possible recording for each. Once her performance was completed, my charcoal-coated companion had been exhausted, and had taken her leave of us to take a nap.

Homage had been gushing about the performance and the new music since. Thankfully, I felt no repeat pangs of jealousy at this. I was, in fact, rather in awe myself. Homage and I spent over an hour just reliving the performance like a couple of fanfillies after a concert.

The first song had long been a Stable Two favorite (if I was to attribute to her a theme song, it would have been that one) and the second also a popular one from her days in the Stable. The third was her rendition of a song that she had once told me was originally performed by Pinkie Pie and the original DJ Pon3 at Hoofbeats, something she had chosen especially for DJ Pon3 -- it was the song she had started to sing at Shattered Hoof, and I was thrilled to finally hear it to completion! The effect on Homage was thrilling. I loved seeing the little grey unicorn squee!

The final number was one I had heard Velvet Remedy constructing during our travels. The one she had once claimed was about me. I couldn't decide if I wanted to melt or to hide.

We had reached the edge of a mezzanine staring down into the lower floor of the Tenpony Tower mall, filled with classy shops (including one just for wine and another across from it that had been just for cheese, but was now closed). As we approached the stairs down, I stopped at the sight below. SteelHooves was trotting about, peering into storefront windows and taking in displays of art, casual as you please. All around him, ponies were stopping and staring, some shying away. I saw a mother pull her curious filly behind her protectively.

"Your friend is causing quite a stir," Homage noted.

I chuckled. "I guess the high society of Tenpony isn't used to seeing a pony in magical power armor." I wondered if his armored hooves were scuffing their pretentiously polished marble floor.

"Well, he is a Steel Ranger. That gives most ponies pause."

This was not the first time I had heard somepony I trusted suggest the Steel Rangers had a less than sterling reputation. "Why is that?"

Homage looked at me with surprise. "You're traveling with a Steel Ranger," she said slowly, "And you don't know anything about them?"

I opened my muzzle to say that I knew they were... what? I knew them from the posters, but those were two hundred years old. Truth was, I didn't know the Steel Rangers. I knew SteelHooves. At least more than my companions knew the enigmatic pony completely concealed by his armor. I'd seen a memory orb. One of a memory I had assumed (with reason) was his.

"No... I suppose I really don't. Tell me."

Homage guided us away from the stairs and towards a table at a small but expensive eatery. A waitress pony brought us menus the moment we sat down, managing to look haughty, as if her customers were beneath her. Looking at the menu, I once again discovered that everything on it was a fancified version of pre-war food.

I shook my head, pushing the menu aside. “Fifty bottle caps for a banana puree that I can find in the refrigerator of a ruined building for free? No thanks. Frying it into strips and weaving it to look like a basket isn’t worth that much.”

Homage lifted an eyebrow. “Try to remember that most ponies here wouldn’t last a day on the outside. There are raiders, slavers, renegade security robots and possibly even a stray manticore between them and that ‘free’ food.” She looked around at the other patrons, then leaned forward and whispered, “Honestly, I don’t think most of these ponies could handle radroaches. They’d stomp one, then the other radroaches would kill them while they were still trying to scrape radroach gunk from their hooves in uncontrolled disgust.”

I looked around at the elite mares and gentlestallions of Tenpony. She was probably right.

“The stockpiles from Tenpony Tower itself ran out generations ago. What they sell now has been acquired from scavenger ponies, specialists in plumbing the ruins of Manehattan for foodstuffs. Fortunately, there were food shops, restaurants and groceries galore in this city before the bomb, so scavenging has been as fruitful as it is dangerous. But scavenger ponies don’t risk their necks for cheap. And with how irradiated all the water is, it’s hard for a pony family to purify enough for a tiny garden. For a restaurant like this, fresh crops are out of the question.”

I considered that. Then picked up the menu again.

I ordered the fried banana puree basket and a bottle of wine. It was surprisingly full of flavor.

“The Steel Rangers,” Homage explained over our glasses of wine, “Are the old guard of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. They see themselves as the knights of the greatness of the past, which they consider to be tied to Equestria’s advancements in technology and industry, and custodians of the technology that their Ministry helped create.

“Honestly, most of them would be more interested in saving your PipBuck than saving you.”



After lunch, I treated Homage to an early evening at the spa. The last time had been so utterly delightful that I had to share the experience with her.

Homage had asked that the small radio in the spa be turned to DJ Pon3's station. From the expression the spa ponies gave her, they didn't much approve of the ghoul-loving renegade, but were used to this request. With the new music playing, I suspected that the broadcast's popularity was peaking.

One of the pretty spa ponies was dabbing my face with cleansing and revitalizing mud when the voice of DJ Pon3 blasted out of the little radio.

“Good evening, children!”

I looked to Homage in surprise. She winked back before they covered her eyes with slices of cucumber.

“Got a question for all you faithful listeners. Have any of you mares or bucks ever seen... a ghost? ‘Now, DJ Pon3!’ I hear ya say. ‘There’s no such thing as ghosts! Been ghost stories about Manehattan ever since my grandmother’s grandmother was a filly, and no pony’s ever actually seen one. Ghost stories are all made up, y’know!’ Well, now what if I, DJ Pon3, your voice in the wasteland, were to tell you that I *have* seen a ghost? And I don’t mean heroic Stable Dwellers who miraculously survive falling off cliffs in trains, not this time.”

I groaned aloud. I would have clenched my eyes, but they were already being covered with vegetables.

“Now, it was several years ago, and I had just gotten myself out of a tight spot with one of those manticores, so I was ridin’ Dash and Stampede at the time. But she was there, Celestia’s honest truth. Never seen her again, or found the exact spot I’d stumbled

onto. But there are more crazy things in this wild wasteland than you'd believe."

Later, as spa ponies gave us a ponypedi and horn treatment, I asked Homage, "What is Stampede?"

"Oh, a mixture of Rage and painkillers," Homage answered. "A friend and I found the recipe in the ruins of a M.O.P. clinic when we were younger."

My curiosity took hold. "A friend? Will I get to meet her?"

"No. I'm afraid my friend didn't survive the efforts to get us into Tenpony Tower."



I felt amazingly refreshed and relaxed. Our time in the spa had been pleasant and intimate, and I had high hopes for the rest of the evening.

As we stepped out of the spa, Homage leaned close and whispered, "Had that last bit pre-recorded. It's a good idea to be seen in public occasionally while DJ Pon3 is 'live' on the radio."

I nodded, staring at her just a little. The mud bath had been the first time I had seen her wearing neither a dress nor a spa robe. Her cutie mark looked like it could be either a speaker or a megaphone. Either way, it was perfectly appropriate to her. And I could see why she chose to keep it private through dressing finely. If anyone suspected she was more than just DJ Pon3's errand filly, the cutie mark was all but a dead giveaway.

Three little ponies galloped up to us, two colts and a younger filly. The two youngest had tears in their eyes, the colt trying to hold his back while the filly was blinking hers away with a hopeful expression.

I heard Homage moan at their approach.

"Miss Homage," the oldest called out as they drew close. "DJ Pon3 says that daddy tried to rob the Heroine of the Wasteland, an' that's why he's in jail. Is it true?"

“Did he really do that?”

“Daddy wouldn’t.”

Oh fuck me with the moon. Moon, sun, both of them. Rape me hard.

Homage looked, if anything, even less comfortable. But she stood by the truth. “Yes, children. I’m afraid he did.”

“But he’s really sorry...” I interjected, even though I knew the only thing Monterey Jack was actually sorry about was that it put him in a bad place. “...and I’m sure they’ll let him go. I...”

I paused, wincing as I chose my words speaking more slowly, “I know the Stable Dweller is really upset to see him in jail.”

“Will she save him?” the filly blurted out with so much hope in her voice it nearly knocked me over.

“Why would she do that?” her eldest brother retorted. “He threatened her and tried to *rob* her.”

I looked to Homage hopelessly.

“They ain’t gonna let him go,” said the middle brother. “They’re gonna hang him in two days.”



I paced back and forth in the Athenaeum as Homage watched me sadly. “You can’t interfere.”

“Oh yes I can!”

Homage gave a melancholy sigh. “I understand why you feel you should. Even if he did lay his own hay. But from what you said, it doesn’t really sound like he wants to be helped.”

I snorted. “Then I’m not going to leave it up to him. He has three children that need looking after. They need to come before his twisted-up code of honor.”

“Littlepip,” Homage whimpered. “We’ve just met. I don’t want to lose you already.”

I stopped, shocked. “Lose me?”

In exasperation, Homage pointed out, “If you do anything, and survive the guards with their battle saddles, you and your friends will never be allowed to set hoof in Tenpony Tower again.”

I turned and looked into her eyes. They were glistening, ready to cry.

“I’ll be with you, always, pretty much wherever you go. Just tune in to DJ Pon3 and I’ll be there. But... *you* won’t be able to be with *me*.”

I fell back on my haunches as the weight of what I would be sacrificing descended fully upon me.



Night was falling as I walked slowly along the Celestia Line. Velvet Remedy and Steelhooves walked in line behind me, Calamity was flying scout.

All I had told the others was that I was going for a walk. Every one of them insisted on coming with me. Only Velvet Remedy asked if there was a reason why, and she did so in private. She could tell I was distressed, and she was alarmed that I was not spending the evening with Homage. Calamity, I think, was looking for an excuse to stretch his wings. SteelHooves simply fell in behind me without comment; I felt he would go anywhere I did, and I still had no idea why.

Truth was, as much as I wanted to spend the night with Homage, I was too messed up inside to enjoy it. I needed fresh air. I needed to clear my head. I needed a distraction.

Fortunately, the grey unicorn had not only understood but had encouraged me.

Velvet Remedy’s horn provided light; I didn’t even need the one from my PipBuck. The quiet of the night wrapped us like a blanket, punctured by the occasional distant screams or gunshots. Each time,

Calamity swooped away to investigate. Sometimes, he came back with reports of scavengers fighting off wild animals; most of the time, he returned no wiser than before. Once, his disappearance was followed by several little thundercracks -- I knew the sound of his battle saddle by heart. I heard no return fire, but we all stopped and waited and worried all the same. It took him a quarter of an hour to return, and when he did so, he was laden with sacks of pilfered goods.

"Raider nest. Bunch o' earth pony raiders with spears an sledgehammers," he explained with a grin. "No pony expects a pegasus!"

He landed and passed me a sack full of metal apples. "They didn't have any ammo either, but they had these." SteelHooves offered to take the grenades. Of the lot of us, he was the only one who actually had any skill with the things.

"One o' these days, we gotta getcha somethin' that don't do splash damage."

Calamity passed another sack, this one clearly holding a square box with beveled edges inside, to Velvet Remedy. "The medical kit they 'ad was locked, so Ah jus' brung the whole thing."

"Brought," Velvet corrected as she took the sack.

"Tha's what Ah said."

Velvet rolled her eyes to me before slinging the sack over her, clasping it to her saddlebag harness. There was no rush in opening it. I could pick the lock when we reached the next Four Stars station.

Presents delivered, Calamity flew ahead again.



The next Four Stars station was the sight of a massacre. I watched SteelHooves tread between the bodies of over thirty ghouls. Most of them looked like they had been mowed down by heavy minigun fire. Powerful explosions had torn holes in the walls of the station and the homes that had been built into and around it.

The place was rank with the wet smell of ghoul corpses. The buzzing of flies was a constant drone that reminded me of the high whine of Stable Two's lights.

Velvet Remedy had fled up the line about three hundred yards, unable to stomach this. Calamity was looting the bodies.

"Rottingtail's group," SteelHooves finally announced, long after I had come to the same realization. He kept his deep voice neutral. I wished I could see his expression behind the mask.

"SteelHooves?" I asked cautiously. "Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked, again keeping his voice neutral. Too neutral. He was refraining from something -- whether it was laughing in joy or raging in offense, I couldn't guess. "How about you? You're not indulging in the looting, I notice. As Calamity would say, it's not like these creatures are using anything here anymore. Might as well go to our use."

To SteelHooves: looting ghouls was okay but looting Steel Rangers was not? I didn't like that, although with consideration I had to admit to myself that I would probably react considerably worse towards the looting of the bodies of stable dwellers.

"I'm going to burn them," I announced. "As soon as Calamity is done scavenging. If you want, you should join him in that."

"Interesting," SteelHooves intoned, but remained with me.

I found his reaction to my reaction as interesting as he apparently found my reaction to be. As morbid and repulsive as the setting was, I decided to attempt to fathom our new friend. "I... heard about the Steel Rangers. They don't exactly have a... heroic reputation."

"Is that how you see yourself?" he replied. "You're a hero?"

I flinched but quickly suspected he was deflecting. "How about you? How do you see yourself?"

"As a traditionalist."

Okay, what the hell did that mean? I tried again, "I'm told that most Steel Rangers are more interested in saving technology than saving ponies. How about you?"

SteelHooves was quiet.

I pressed. "Are you following us around to keep my PipBuck safe?"

SteelHooves snorted a laugh. Then, somberly, he revealed a little of himself. "Steel Rangers, each and every one, swear the same Oath. But there is some... divergence of opinion as to whether our fealty is owed to the Mare of the Ministry or to the Ministry Itself."

He spoke of "the Ministry" as if there was only one. Or, at least, only one of any importance.

"Are they that different?" I asked, but Calamity returned before I could get an answer, and SteelHooves was not willing to share with an audience.

"Ah think Ah got everythin' we might want."

"You have a strong back for a pegasus," SteelHooves ribbed. "Are you sure you don't want to get the furniture as well?"

Calamity grunted, flapping his wings. Ignoring the gibe of SteelHooves' comment, I considered the underlying truth. "Calamity, why don't you fly back and unload that stuff back at the suite. You can catch up with us. We'll still be on the Celestia Line."

Calamity smiled, tipping back his hat. "Will do!" Then he was off.

I focused, the bodies of the ghouls wrapping in light one by one. I levitated them into a pile. Then, walking out ahead on one of the monorails with SteelHooves following on the other, I reached a safe distance. I turned, floating up the zebra rifle, and sent half a clip into the mound of ghoul cadavers. The pile began to burn.

We reached Velvet Remedy, who was staring at the ghoulish pyre with strange fascination. I looked back, trying to figure out why the sight was held her gaze so.

A balefire phoenix was circling the bonfire of corpses.



"...repeating message. Again, this is Blackwing of Blackwing's Talons sending out a distress call on every friendly frequency. Please send this message on to any Talon companies in the area. My team and I are trapped on the roof of the Horseshoe Tower by enemy forces. We are low on ammo and cannot hold out much longer. Oh... oh no... here come more of them...!"

The radio message ended abruptly, then looped, repeating the words of the female griffin. She sounded younger than Gawd and not as hard.

My PipBuck had started receiving the distress signal over a mile away from Horseshoe Tower. The signal was weak, but Horseshoe Tower had been one of the tallest buildings in all of Equestria, and was the largest skyscraper remaining in the Manehattan Ruins, easily dwarfing Tenpony Tower by over double its height.

"To anyone receiving this message, this is Blackwing of Blackwing's Talons. Please, we need help. We're pinned on the roof of the Horseshoe Tower by overwhelming enemy forces. We are low on ammo and food, and we've lost three of our team already. We are in desperate need of assistance. If anyone can hear this message, please bring help. Please hurry! We can't hold out much longer. This is a repeating message. Again, this is Blackwing..."

I removed my earbloom and played the recording aloud as we got within a few blocks. I had hoped Calamity would catch up with us before we reached the skyscraper's Four Stars station, but I wasn't willing to wait. Each loop of the message pressed upon me mounting sense of urgency.

"We're going in," I announced. Then, reconsidering my words, "I'm going in. You two can stay behind if you want. I understand." I swished my tail. "Besides, somepony should let Calamity know where we are."

SteelHooves nickered. "Personally, I look forward to the chance to meet these noble ghoul-slayers." He looked at me. "And you are going because? Are you being a heroine? You enjoy risking your life for strangers? Or is there something else about Horseshoe Tower?"

I glared at my companion, then smirked. "Oh, I just want to know how a bunch of *griffins* could get trapped on the *roof* of a building."

SteelHooves chuckled. I turned to Velvet Remedy.

"You are *not* going in alone," Velvet insisted with a grim smile and a stomp. And we can leave Calamity a note." She paused. "He *can* read, can't he?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, and you know it." Then considered the idea and found myself at a loss. I still had the clipboard and pencil that I had taken from the Tenpony Tower constabulary, but a note left under a chunk of crumbled concrete would be easily missed. For Calamity to see it, we'd need to paint the message in big letters on the roof of the station. And even then he would miss it if we didn't illuminate it somehow. I pointed these problems out to Velvet Remedy.

"In case you missed the light show earlier, dear, illumination will not be a problem," Velvet smiled wryly. "I can cast a spell on the letters that will make them quite eye-catching."

"Can you just make glowing words?"

Velvet Remedy shook her head. "Yes, but only if I stayed here to maintain them. To leave them behind, I would have to enchant existing writing. Paint, preferably, unless we can find a really big inkpot."

SteelHooves whinnied as he trotted past us to the station's double doors that lead into Horseshoe Tower. "Then we'll paint it in the blood of the first enemy we encounter." He turned and bucked the doors hard enough to not only swing them open but send one of them flying across the waiting room inside. I cringed and thanked the Goddesses that the room wasn't full of enemies. "Are you coming?"



I helped Velvet Remedy step over the body of the griffin, his bulk nearly doubled by the twin minigun battle saddle that was still strapped to his corpse. It was the first body that we had found which wasn't centuries old. The floor was littered with bullet casings, making walking around it treacherous.

I couldn't tell what killed him. That worried me. It worried me even more when Velvet Remedy diagnosed it as natural causes, her voice loaded with disbelief.

"At least we know they came this way," SteelHooves observed. "I was beginning to worry there was no way up."

Much of Horseshoe Tower's interiors had collapsed. Stairwells had crumbled, hallways had caved in. The entire building had become a maze, forcing us to weave in and out of rooms in order to make it from one end of a hallway to the other, making us go down a floor to find stairs that would take us up two.

Ahead we could hear the spray of water. My PipBuck starting click-clicking softly.

The only way to get to the next set of stairs was through a collapsed section of wall between two bathrooms. The building's water talisman was still pumping water through the shattered pipes. The water was alive with low levels of radiation. The balefire bomb had probably irradiated the talisman itself.

I checked with Velvet Remedy, making sure we had enough RadAway with us. The radioactive shower would be minor, nothing worth getting concerned about. But if this was a sign of bigger problems ahead, I wanted to be sure we were prepared.

Holding my breath, I pushed myself through the spray as quickly as I could. I stumbled a little as the wet floorboards on the other side gave an inch.

“Ooooookie dokey lokey. SteelHooves, I’ll be floating you through and setting you down over there,” I said pointing at the far corner of the room near the doorway out. “This floor is not stable.”

Velvet Remedy stayed back. I focused on SteelHooves, wrapping him in a telekinetic blanket. Slowly, I lifted the heavy Steel Ranger up half a yard and brought him through the shower. I took a single step back, feeling the floor wobble alarmingly once again, and glided him past me towards a corner that I was fairly certain would be dry and stable.

SteelHooves made it halfway there when something he saw through the open doorway caused him to thrash, trying to find purchase on the floor.

Before I could put him down, before I could even ask what he saw, the alicorn stepped into the doorway.

My levitation magic imploded as I gasped in shock. SteelHooves dropped hard, turning to fire at the alicorn, and the floor gave way beneath him. SteelHooves dropped out of sight. I heard splashes beneath. The alicorn took a step forward, looking down at the hole, and rest of the floor collapsed. The alicorn tried to thrust out her wings to fly, but they struck the sides of the doorframe and she fell into the floor below with him.

I found myself standing on a wet, sagging plank jutting out over the floor below like a diving board. Which was appropriate since the floor below was a swimming pool.

My PipBuck started click-click-clicking with great enthusiasm.

Scrambling on the floating debris, the alicorn thrashed. Her horn began to glow. SteelHooves was nowhere in sight, having surely sunk to the bottom.

I wished for the bag of grenades. I had to act fast, but my mind wasn’t thinking fast enough! The alicorn would have her shield up before I had figured out what to do!

Ka-BLAM!!!

An explosion right next to my head blew out my eardrums. The world became a strained, high buzz. I immediately lost all sense of balance, tumbling from my position. I landed on a floating chunk of flooring that immediately began to capsize.

I grasped the chunk of floor telekinetically, letting out a scream I could feel but not hear. Focusing had become excruciating.

In front of me, I saw the alicorn floating in debris and blood. Velvet Remedy had blown a large chunk of the creature's neck away with the combat shotgun. It wasn't dead, but it was a race between blood loss and drowning as to which would finish her off first.

I watched in horror as it began to heal, the wound slowly closing.

They fucking *regenerate*?

That was *not fair*! That was *not* okay!

With a flash of anger, I started telekinetically grasping jagged, floating bits of floor and jabbing at the alicorn's neck until I had crudely sawed it off. The creature began to sink beneath the reddened, radioactive water.



Velvet Remedy crouched over me, her horn pointing at my left ear. She had already restored hearing to my right.

SteelHooved stood next to us on the edge of the swimming pool, dripping with water that was making my PipBuck clickity-click wildly. He was arguing with Velvet over how much RadAway he needed to drink. Velvet was leaning towards every last packet we had; SteelHooves was insisting he didn't need any at all.

My left ear began to mend.

"We don't have time for this," SteelHooves stomped, cracking the tiles under his armored hoof. "Those creatures always travel in groups."

“Then take the RadAway and stop being a baby,” my shotgun surgeon spat back, glowering. “Seriously, do all my patients have to be so difficult?”

I wanted to point out that I was laying there being very non-difficult, thank you.

SteelHooves bristled at that. Finally, I spoke up. “SteelHooves, tell her.”

Both of them turned to stare at me. Or, at least, I assumed SteelHooves was staring at me. His visor was pointed in my direction.

“Tell me what?” Velvet asked me slowly. Then, turning to SteelHooves, “Tell. Me. What?”

SteelHooves was silent.

I sighed. “Look, if I was able to figure it out, so will she. She’s smarter than I am.”

I could tell Velvet Remedy was forcing herself not to react to the compliment.

SteelHooves finally relented.

“I’m a ghoul.”

Velvet Remedy, to her credit, didn’t take a step back. Didn’t even gasp. She was just strangely quiet for a while. Long enough that I would have worried I had lost my hearing again if it wasn’t for the drip, drip, drip on the tiles underneath the Steel Ranger.

“Radiation is... regenerative for ghouls,” SteelHooves admitted. “I was more in danger of drowning.” In truth, there had been little danger of that with the rebreather in his magically powered armor.

Of course, I realized, feeling slow and stupid: the alicorn was regenerating because she was in the pool. Radiation must effect them the same way.

“Well then, I guess you won’t need the RadAway,” Velvet Remedy concluded casually, slipping the packs back into one of her open medical boxes.



Knowing I was by far the most capable of stealth, I determined that I should scout ahead. I spotted the alicorn’s two sisters in a room on the next floor. Their tails were to me, oblivious to my presence as they seemed to be focusing on trying to magically rip the door of a safe off its hinges. Their coats were a deep purple, almost black. And that was not all I noticed.

They have no cutie marks!

I slipped out my sniper rifle and slid into the zen of S.A.T.S.

BLAM!!

The first alicorn went down hard, brain blasting out the front of her skull to paint the safe she had been so focused on. The second began to turn, her shield already starting to form. But I was faster. And these creatures were not that much tougher than the rest of us if caught unawares and without their protective spells cast.

BLAM!!

I slipped out of S.A.T.S. as the second alicorn’s body slumped to the floor. I looked at the safe, the splatter of blood, brains and bone reminding me that we never did go back and paint that note for Calamity.

Wait. Stop.

I’m looking at the gore from somepony... or at least *something* that I have just murdered... and I’m thinking *that?*

Am I really becoming that callous to the horrors and violence in the Equestrian Wasteland?

I wondered where this would fit on Monterey Jack’s slide of loss-of-self.

I also wondered what the hell the alicorns had been after. So I trotted up to pick the lock. The safe, however, refused to be unlocked. After examination and struggling, I realized that it wasn't jammed or broken by the alicorns. I just wasn't good enough.

Well, I knew how to fix that.

I found myself smiling as the Party-Time Mint-al washed me clean of all the stupidity and dullness that was holding me back. I took a deep breath of relief! Finally, I was the real me again. My smile faded as I turned to see Velvet Remedy watching me sadly.



Three more alicorns stood on the other side of a gaping divide. At least five internal floors had collapsed, leaving a honeycomb of half-rooms ringing a massive pit. Motes of debris and ash floated in the void between us.

SteelHooves opened fire with his grenade machinegun, taking out one of them (and all the rooms around her) before she could fully erect her shield. The two others launched themselves into the air, spreading their wings as their shields bubbled around them.

I gave a prayer to Luna and floated out a memory orb, making sure it was the one of Pinkie Pie's last party, and not the one I had retrieved from the safe seven floors below. I began levitating the orb towards closer of the two.

The alicorn let out a wicked, bitter and majestic laugh that echoed off the walls of the pit. Using telekinesis of her own, she knocked it free of my telekinetic sheath with a hurled chair. The orb containing the memory of Pinkie Pie's last party plunged into the depths below, bounced, rolled and disappeared through a crack, lost forever.

The dark-purple coated alicorn's voice rumbled with undeniable superiority. "Do you think We are fools? We remember how you killed Us before!"

Oh we were so fucked!

“Run!” I yelled, turning tail and racing towards the stairs.

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves galloped after me, overtaking me as I charged up out of the stairwell and into a hallway.

Turning, I ordered SteelHooves to collapse the entrance behind us. His grenade machinegun was useless against a shielded alicorn, but more than a match for the crumbling structure we were in. Concrete and wood rained down in a thunderous cloud of dust.

“What happened?” SteelHooves demanded.

Panting, I explained. “There’s some sort of telepathy involved...” My fears had been proven true. “...not just between the ones that are together. All of them. Every time we kill one, they learn from it.” I wouldn’t be able to trick them the same way twice.

Our ploy bought us time, but not much. I could hear them on the other side, clearing a path to us.

With a flash of light, one of the alicorns appeared right between us.

“*They can teleport too!?*” Velvet Remedy blurted, finally reaching the same level of hateful disbelief I felt towards these creatures.

The alicorn herself seemed a little surprised. Apparently, teleporting into someplace you can’t see was tricky work even for these creatures. I don’t think she expected to be this close. Too bad she hadn’t appeared a yard to either side, stuck herself in a wall. But no, we couldn’t be that lucky.

Or could we? I realized something very peculiar. The alicorn’s sphere of shielding was up at full strength, but she had appeared literally in the center of us. Parts of each of us were inside the barrier. Including SteelHooves’s metal rear end.

The alicorn began casting a spell. I felt a vice tighten around my heart. My hooves began to tingle.

A *heart attack* spell? Feeling panic well up inside me as my heart struggled to beat, I suddenly knew how these creatures had killed the griffins through “natural causes”.

“Move!” I yelled as I telekinetically grasped the sack of grenades. SteelHooves dashed forward, leaving the grenades inside the sack. Without opening it to reveal the contents, I focused and tried to pull as many of the pins as I could. Unfortunately, moving objects I couldn’t directly see was as difficult for me as teleporting into an unknown space was for the alicorn. I only managed to pull the pins on three before I backed out of the shield.

The alicorn looked questioningly down at the sack as it fell to her feet. Her shield contained the explosion quite effectively. It was a gory and brilliant sight.



“Well, that would explain how griffins can get trapped on a roof,” I said flatly.

We had to fight through four more of the creatures before we made it to the roof. The combination of my stealth and SteelHooves’ massive firepower kept us alive, but it was getting harder. They were all alert for us now, and seemed to be coordinating their defenses. We had to run any time they got their spells up, and we were not fast enough to take out more than two before the others were able to cast their shields.

On the roof were four more alicorns. They were sitting, frozen, at the four corners of the building, their attentions focused inward. Instead of surrounding themselves with a sphere of protective magic, they were cooperatively maintaining a hemisphere of magical force that was keeping the three griffin mercs caged.

“New one on me,” SteelHooves muttered from beside me.

“Oh thank the Great Egg,” one of them blurted out, seeing us through the glowing shell of force that trapped her and the other two surviving griffins. She stopped. “Where are the rest of you?”

I looked around. Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were flanking me. The Goddesses only knew where Calamity was. I suspected he was circling the Celestia line, hoping to spot us. I winced at the thought

and hoped he wasn't too worried. I could see the faintest suggestion of approaching dawn on the skyline.

A chill wind blew at my mane, bringing the salty smell of the harbor. It was almost a shame that we'd reached the roof in the dark of night. The view in the daytime must be amazing.

Then again, the view could also paralyze me with vertigo. So probably better we were here now after all. Turning back to the three griffins, "This is it. Just us."

"Well, this isn't much of a rescue," one of the griffins said bitterly.

"Gratitude. Look it up."

I turned away and looked over the alicorns. They were statuesque in their concentration. I wasn't even sure they realized we were on the roof with them. And they were outside the shield they were creating. We could take three of them down with a coordinated attack. Surely the griffins could take out the last one. "What kind of firepower do you guys still have?"

I could hear SteelHooves whistle as the griffin in the back stepped forward. She was wearing what looked like magically powered armor of her own, a griffin design -- nowhere near as complicated or encompassing as SteelHooves, leaving her talons, legs and wings bare, as well as most of her face -- with a huge, tri-barreled, biggest battle saddle I had ever seen.

"Dismounted AA cannon," SteelHooves said appreciatively. I had no idea what that meant, but this looked like the non-magical-energy version of the plasma cannon that Calamity had used against the dragon.

Well, we definitely had the firepower.

"Only five shots left," the griffin said glumly. Still, five shots from that thing should be more than...

"And there are four wings of these horny bastards on their way," the first griffin announced. From her voice, I finally identified her as

Blackwing. I noted mentally that I would not have chosen the word “horny” to describe the alicorns. Unless Blackwing knew something I did not.

“Four wings?” I asked. “You mean two more?”

“No,” SteelHooves interjected. “She means twelve.”

“Oh. Well... moonrocks.” Made sense. A “wing” then must be a group of three. Explains why there were three of them hunting SteelHooves outside Fetlock.

“These four have just been keeping us pinned here while their reinforcements arrive,” Blackwing informed us.

Wait...

I perked up. “We’re okay, then. I’m pretty sure we took them out on the way up!” I mentally counted. One in the pool. Two at the safe. Three in the pit. One of those had lived, and joined up with three more. So we’d killed...

...nine. There were still three left. Somehow, we’d managed to go right past a whole wing of alicorns without either party realizing it.

And they would probably be bursting onto the roof any minute. We had to work fast!



I quickly laid out the plan and everyone started taking their positions. As they did so, I couldn’t help but voice my suspicions to Blackwing: “What is it that you mercenaries were after in this place that these creatures want so badly?”

“Codes to crack a safe in the Ministry of Image on Ministry Walk,” Blackwing said, surprisingly forthcoming. “Safe contains an artifact that our employer would really like to take possession of. Turns out, the ‘goddess’ these monsters serve wants it too.”

“What kind of artifact?” I asked, as I levitated out Little Macintosh and checked the load. I was going to use a magic bullet for this, just to be sure.

“The Black Book. Well, the Black Book of something-or-other. A tome of some of the foulest zebra magics. Stuff that can tear a pony’s soul apart, they say. Or raise spirits from the grave.”

Necromancy.

The very thought that such spells and powers actually existed gave me nightmarish chills. To my knowledge, no pony had ever used such dark arts; it was horrifying to imagine that the zebras actually could. Necromancy wasn’t even supposed to be real -- just a horror story to scare young fillies at slumber parties.

If this was the sort of foulness the Ministry of Image was casting their nets to catch, the purging of books took on a whole new and terrifying light. I began to wonder if the purpose behind the confiscation of “ideologically incompatible” books wasn’t, at least in part, a smokescreen for this. Because by the Goddesses, you *couldn’t* tell the public that the zebras had necromancy, much less that books on the stuff were slipping into Equestria!

The notion of zebra necromancy breathed an uncomfortable new dimension into how being on the fringe of a megaspell event turned ponies in to ghou-ponies and zombie-ponies.

While I was talking to Blackwing and pondering the implications of the Black Book, SteelHooves and Velvet Remedy were discussing our foes. I caught the end of the conversation.

“...don’t all have the same spells. Only the deep purple-coated ones like the wings below can teleport,” SteelHooves explained to her. “The midnight blue coats...”

“Invisibility,” Velvet Remedy interjected. “Oh yes. I remember.”

“The dark green ones? I haven’t seen them do anything the others can’t do.” SteelHooves walked up close to one of the statue-like alicorns and

took a close look at its coat, a forest green so deep it was nearly black. "Until now."

Butcher, the griffin with the heavy gun stood at the ready in front of the farthest alicorn. SteelHooves had locked onto the one on my left. Velvet Remedy had her (formerly my) combat shotgun hovering an inch from the temple of the one on my right. I floated Little Macintosh between the eyes of the one in front of me.

"On the count of three. One... Two..."

In a thunderous crash of gunshot and explosions, three alicorns went down. So went the shield. The last alicorn immediately sprang to life, alert and...

...the griffin's supergun let out a boom that could be heard on the moon. The fourth alicorn was simply no more.

Blackwing swooped forward and took me in his talons as the other lightly encumbered griffin scooped up Velvet, taking off into the air. I threw a telekinetic sheath around SteelHooves, carrying him with us. The last griffin took off, circling to cover our tail.

We were a few blocks away when the last three alicorns burst onto the roof. Part of me wanted to laugh tauntingly. Then they reminded us that they could fly too. And, unencumbered, they were much faster and more maneuverable.

Wrapping themselves in magical shields, they swooped to close the distance.

I closed my eyes, trying to force my PTM-enhanced brain to think of something. For the first time, Party-Time Mint-als were failing me.

"Well now, y'all look like ya c'n use some help!"

Only once before had I ever been so happy to hear Calamity's voice and that was when I was facing a dragon. I opened my eyes, staring to him thankfully. "I hope you have a plan. Cuz I've got nothing."

“Y’all just follow me!” Calamity smiled and shot out ahead of us, dropping altitude.

Turns out, the one direction that heavily-laden griffins could fly even faster than alicorns was down. They gave chase, but we were pulling ahead.

“Unless we’re diving for a mattress factory,” Blackwing squawked, “This’ll be a really short trip!”

I glanced back. There was good distance between us and the three creatures, now only visible as glowing bubbles of sickly green energy that zipped through the sky towards us.

“Start pulling up now!” Calamity called back.

“Does he have any idea...” the griffin carrying Velvet Remedy grunted, “how hard it is... to pull up... at this speed... carrying this much weight?”

I could see the street coming up fast as we began to level. I smiled, thinking of just how much junk Calamity had a habit of scavenging. I had no doubt that the answer was yes.

The three griffins finally pulled straight with only yards to spare, skimming over the tops of the taller wagons. I felt a hoof drag along the top of a passenger wagon. The alicorns were beginning to close the gap. Lightning ripped from one of their horns, shooting past us.

Up ahead, the street ended in a massive parking lot. Rows upon rows of delivery wagons were lined up before a long building. With the exceptional visual clarity provided by Party-Time Mint-als, I was able to make out a logo on the roof of the building as we approached it: a filled-in black omega symbol with a white earth pony seeming to levitate a package on her back.

I suddenly realized the plan. An eye-blink before Calamity started shooting.

I turned on my Eyes-Forwards Sparkle, making a quick scan for life down there. I only had a moment, but at least I had Party-Time Mint-

als boosting my keenness and judgement. All I was seeing were red blips scurrying about, below. Probably radroaches. I could hear a series of pops as we shot past the delivery wagons and over the rooftop.

The alicorns were just reaching the parking lot, moving too fast to stop, when the first delivery wagons exploded like megaspell bombs in extreme miniature. The first explosions instantly set off the rest, and three city blocks erupted in a vibrant cascade of insanely-colored light.

Their shields couldn't protect them against *that*. The blast of radiation couldn't heal them from a force that ripped them apart beneath a cellular level. They could not even mentally scream. There was no time. The three alicorns were simply gone.

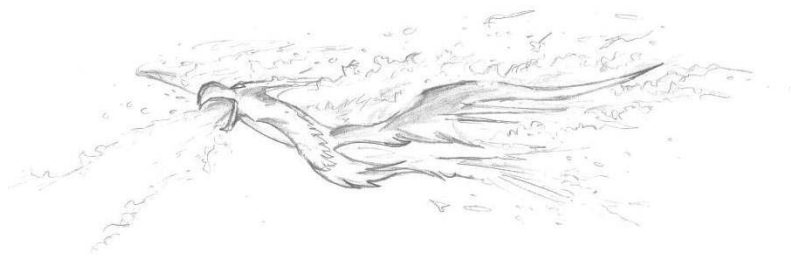
The building shielded us just enough to save us before it was vaporized. My PipBuck screamed as we were hit by a wash of heat and radiation. My E.F.S. flashed a red warning that I was suffering radiation poisoning before it collapsed altogether, my PipBuck crashing.

A moment later, we crashed too.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Mighty Telekinesis (level three) - Your telekinesis is Twilight Sparkle tier. You can handle multiple objects with ease; and with enough focus, you could probably carry around an Ursa Minor!

CHAPTER NINETEEN



BETRAYAL

“Tell me that my friends are all lying to me and avoiding me because they don’t like my parties and they don’t want to be my friends anymore!”

Addiction.

How do you know when you’re trapped? When you want something more than anything else? When you find yourself lying to your friends and hiding things from them because you don’t want them to know? When you can’t go a week without indulging? A day?

Or simply when you insisted that because none of the above really applied to you, you were fine?

We had crashed and everything went black, like somebody blowing out a candle. I was lying on the street, knocked out and badly hurt. But in the depths of my unconsciousness, I was still crashing. Pinkie Pie’s last message plagued my dreams. By the time I regained consciousness, the Party-Time Mint-al had worn off, and I was back in the mire of my own feebleness. Even the multi-colored pyrotechnic display that consumed three city blocks behind us failed to fully pierce through my mental fog with its brilliance. As I peeled myself off the rubble-strewn street, my mind’s eye could still see that skeleton, alone in a corner... a clutched figure of a friend having fallen into her ribcage.

And still all I wanted was another Party-Time Mint-al. To clear the fog and confusion. To make me brilliant so I could help my friends.

In that moment, I realized that even if I didn't meet any of the criteria on my own mental checklist of "warning signs", I risked losing control. *I* still chose whether I took a PTM or not, and I could refuse at any time. But... I had reached a point where I didn't feel right -- didn't even feel like myself -- unless I had that clarifying and enlightening boost from Party-Time Mint-als.

Maybe, just maybe, I did have a problem?



"Yee-HAW!" Calamity cried out triumphantly as he fluttered back to the rest of us. "Now that's how ya do it Dashite-style!"

SteelHooves groaned deeply as the metal-clad Steel Ranger pushed himself to his armored hooves. "For the record," he grumbled, "Nopony here is allowed to complain about *my* battle tactics being excessive ever again."

"Aaaaugh!" one of the griffins (Butcher, I think) cried out. "My wing! I think it's broken..."

Velvet Remedy dragged herself out of the wreckage of the overturned wagon she had landed in. Her own body torn and bleeding, particularly a deep gash on her forehead, but she ignored her own wounds, hobbling towards the badly injured griffin. About halfway to the griffin, she stopped, standing shakily as she gazed at the swirling, prismatic fire behind us.

"Merciful Celestia. I hope nopony was living in any of those buildings!"

Calamity landed proudly next to her. "Of course not. Cleared the raiders out of that pit yesterday evening, remember?"

We did what when?

Velvet Remedy swayed a bit and reached up to wipe the stream of blood out of her eye. "Oh... You mean when you flew off and left the rest of us worried sick about you?" She put her hoof down and took

one more step towards her intended patient, saying, “I... I’ll help. Hold still...”

She made it three more steps before fainting. “Whoa there!” Calamity exclaimed as he caught her before she could hit the pavement. He held onto Velvet as she slumped.

I tried to trot over to her, only to find I was lying down. That seemed surprising. I tried to get up, and sharp agony lanced through my right foreleg. I lifted it, trying to understand what was wrong... it felt heavy. My eyes took in the spear of rebar jutting through it, just above the dead screen of my PipBuck.

“oh. That’s not good...”

I looked up to see the dark form of an armored griffin approaching me, then my eyes rolled up and I lost consciousness again.



“...had already acquired the codes when they started boxing us in. We thought it was a stroke of luck that they were pushing us towards the roof, but those bitches had turned our escape route into a trap.”

I woke up for the second time to the sound of Blackwing and SteelHooves deep in discussion. I didn’t think I had passed out for more than a few minutes. I felt weaker than I had back when I was sick in SteelHooves’ cabin, deeply ill, and my right foreleg throbbed with such pain that I couldn’t hold back my tears.

“My team noticed alicorns checking out at least one other safe in the building,” SteelHooves pointed out. “Did they know you had the codes already?”

Blackwing laughed. “Well, we sure didn’t advertise it!”

My attention drifted. The beauty of Velvet Remedy had settled down next to me while I was out. Velvet Remedy was kneeling over me, her healing horn glowing. It was a position that even I was getting tired of seeing her in. Her head was wrapped in magic-laced bandages, a large patch of red seeping into them over her mending wound.

"I hope you like the taste of RadAway, Littlepip," she said, smiling and trying to sound casual. I could detect the strain in her voice no matter how well she hid it. "SteelHooves is the only one of us who won't be guzzling a crateful if I can get Doctor Helpinghoof to sell us his stock."

"Velvet... are you all right? You fell."

Velvet smiled softly to me. "I have a concussion, but it shouldn't be too serious. I'm more worried about you, Littlepip."

Pfft. I'd be fine. A few healing potions and I'd be good as new. I told her so. Velvet winced. Why did she wince?

"Littlepip... You can't take a healing potion. Not while that *thing* is still in you." I looked at the bloody, ribbed metal javelin that grotesquely skewered my foreleg. Velvet Remedy continued, "My magic and our medicine can patch you up, yes. But that metal rod has to come out first."

This was going to hurt, wasn't it?

Velvet Remedy assured me that it was going to hurt a *LOT*.

I floated out the memory orb from Horseshoe Tower, contemplating it a moment. The lock on that safe had been the hardest I'd ever tried to crack. It had been beyond the magical abilities of two alicorns. What secrets could it have been hiding. According to Blackwing, the mercenaries had already found the codes they were looking for elsewhere in the building. Of course, the alicorns didn't know that for sure. They were probably just being thorough.

"On the count of three?" I suggested to Velvet Remedy. She nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"One... Two..."

I reached out with my magic and touched the orb. Even as Velvet Remedy's horn flared and the shaft of rebar was enveloped with light, all my senses dropped away into another world.



I was sitting before banks of terminals, between two other ponies that I paid absolutely no attention to. There was an earbloom buzzing softly in my ear. The screen on the terminal was nothing but a little balloon icon expanding until it popped, then filling again.

The pony I was riding was achy from sitting in the same position for too long. Her mane itched, as did...

Yikes! Okay, *his* mane itched. As well as *other places*. And I suddenly very, very much wanted to be back in the Manehattan Ruins feeling rebar being yanked through my leg instead.

The little balloon popped again and then was replaced by text.

> **Audio transmission intercepted.**

> **Transmission Originates: Orange Residence, Horseshoe Tower, Manehattan**

> **Transmission Received: [][][][]**

> **Transmission Destination Encrypted. Logging call. Operation Oversight Required.**

“Perfect,” I heard and felt the buck say through my mouth in an utterly bored voice. I felt my hoof punch a button without looking at it. The static in my ear was replaced by voices.

“...staying with mah Uncle and Auntie Orange.”

I immediately recognized Apple Bloom’s voice. There was an odd timbre and hoarseness to it, like she had been crying a lot, but was now all cried out.

My host picked up a pencil in his mouth and started doodling on a notepad. I could taste the eraser, and feel the little bite marks on the wooden shaft. I tried to focus on taste and sight and sound, ignoring other senses sternly.

“Is there any word?” The other voice was that of Sweetie Belle. She sounded nervous? Worried?

More words materialized on the screen before me.

> **Illegal Encryption Broken.**

> **Transmission Received: Pony Perfection, Canterlot**

> **Proceed with voice analysis?**

The buck I was riding sighed loudly and hit another button. Then went back to doodling, only half-watching the screen.

> **Voice Analysis in progress.**

“No,” Apple Bloom claimed dourly. “The doctor ponies say sis will pull through, but...”

“...But?” Sweetie Belle sounded like she was afraid to hear the answer. “I mean, that’s wonderful news, right? Why don’t you sound happy?”

Apple Bloom’s voice dropped low. I felt myself sitting up a little. Apparently, ponies who were trying to be quiet warranted at least a little attention.

“There’s... a rumor,” Apple Bloom confided to her friend. “Some folks ‘re sayin’ that maybe t’wasn’t so much of an accident.”

“What?” Sweetie Belle gasped, her voice dropping to a whisper even in her shock. “Who would want to hurt Applejack?”

The screen flashed as new information spilled out rapidly. Somewhere, a maneframe had just figured out who was talking, and about what. Now the screen and the earbloom had my host’s full attention.

“They say... that maybe t’was somepony within ‘er own Ministry.”

Sweetie Belle was silent on the other end. In the background, I could hear somepony crying, a soft, heartbreaking weeping; but I couldn’t tell whether it was from the unicorn’s end or the earth pony’s. I didn’t have to wonder long.

“What the hay’s goin’ on over there? Sweetie Belle, where are ya calling from? Is everything all right?” And then, as a darker thought seemed to hit the mare, “Did yer sister have an ‘accident’ too?”

“What? Oh, oh no. My sister is fine. We’re... we’re at that spa on Leaf Fall Lane. Rarity’s been here all afternoon trying to get Fluttershy to stop crying.”

“What... about Applejack?”

Sweetie Belle sounded guilty. “uh... no. I don’t think they even know about what happened yet. Rarity called me over a few hours ago. Apparently, when Fluttershy missed their weekly treatment, Rarity went looking for her. She found Fluttershy curled up in a corner in her office at the Ministry of Peace. I don’t really know what happened, but...”

And now it was Apple Bloom’s turn. “But?”

“Fluttershy says that Rainbow Dash called her a traitor!”

“What?!” Apple Bloom wasn’t able to keep her voice down like Sweetie Belle could. I heard someone in the background call out questioningly.

Apple Bloom’s voice became murky as she called back, “No, nothin’s wrong, Uncle Orange. It’s not the hospital. Ah’m just talkin’ t’ Sweetie Belle.” Then, after a pause, she thoughtfully added, “Sounds like Rarity an’ Fluttershy ain’t gonna make it up right away.”

Apple Bloom spoke clearly once again, addressing Sweetie Belle.

“Uh... I ought t’ go. Twilight Sparkle’s s’posed t’ be ‘porting in any minute now. She’ll be staying with us until Applejack’s outta critical,” Apple Bloom explained, “An’ you know how those teleports wreak havoc with these here terminals. Ah really think I could design one better in mah sleep... ‘Sides, Scootaloo would have a right fit if she knew Ah was talkin’ on an unsecured line.”

“A traitor?!” Apple Bloom, can you imagine? Rainbow Dash is her oldest friend. And even worse, she’s the bearer of the Element of

Loyalty!” Sweetie Belle sounded deeply pained. “That’s kinda like... having loyalty itself call you a traitor!”

“Wonder how she’d like it if somepony called her a traitor,” Apple Bloom seethed gloomily.

“How could Rainbow Dash say something like that?”

“I dunno,” Apple Bloom replied, sounding offended. “Ah’ve given up tryin’ t’ understand anymore. Ah just want all this to be over.”

“I know. It... everything... Sometimes I just want to dig a hole in the ground and hide until this whole stupid war is over.”

The screen flashed.

> Transmission Terminated on Receiving End. > Content Analysis proceeding. > Content Tagged Alpha Priority. > Oversight Memory Confirmation Required. > Please Report to your Supervisor.
--

I felt myself get up and shake loose the earbud. “Dammit. I hate memory extraction,” I heard him grump from what felt like my mouth. “Hope those mares die in a fire.”



I returned to a world of darkness and incredible pain. But at least I was a mare again. Biting back a scream, I smiled weakly up at Velvet Remedy who was wrapped my foreleg in healing bandages.

“That was clever,” Velvet Remedy complimented as she floated a couple rejuvenating potions out of a medical box resting beside her. I noticed she wasn’t wearing hers and looked around. I could have sworn she was wearing them before I blacked out the second time, but I couldn’t remember if she was when I woke up.

Not far away, I saw Calamity working on her “saddlebags”, replacing the battle damaged boxes with newer ones he had scavenged from... somewhere.

“Anything interesting?” Velvet Remedy asked, nodding her horn towards the memory orb.

I glanced down at the memory orb; the thoughts that it provoked battled for dominance in my head:

I had glimpsed hints that all was not well inside the Ministry of Technology before, but for anypony within the Ministry to have enough drive and animosity towards Applejack to plot her death... that took the conflict to a whole new level. That placed the call sometime after the death of Applejack’s big brother and her corresponding exertion of greater control over her own Ministry. Probably even after Applesnack’s memory. A new generation of magically-hardened terminals would explain why I kept finding functional ones in the Equestrian Wasteland. And if that call took place when I thought it did, that would explain why the vast majority of terminals were destroyed hunks of scrap. Only the ones deemed most vital or owned by ponies of wealth or prominence would have been upgraded.

I was also beginning to see the possibilities that Gawdyna Grimfeathers had recognized in an entire vault full of memories.

But those thoughts were distractions.

Most importantly, Velvet Remedy must never see this memory.

“Just some buck having a really boring day at work,” I lied, floating it up and back towards my saddlebags. “How’s the griffin with the broken wing?”

“She won’t be able to fly for a while. Her injuries were much worse than when Calamity’s wing got shot...” Velvet said, glancing towards the griffin in question. As soon as Velvet looked away, I gave the memory orb a telekinetic fling, sending it soaring into the night air. With luck, the toss would put it close enough to our Dashite’s

miniature armageddon that at least the poisonous memory would die in a fire.



“DJ Pon3 isn’t telling the whole story,” Blackwing insisted, speaking to SteelHooves. My metal-shrouded companion had oh-so-casually asked about the massacre of the ghoulish ponies on the Celestia Line station. “Sure, Grim Star wanted them dead, but a few of the folk in Tenpony Tower, like that doc, were interested in a more amiable solution.”

“Amiable?” SteelHooves said with disgust-tinged disbelief. “With *ghouls*?”

Blackwing hunched. “Yeah, well I’ve met a few ghoulish ponies in my day that were more respectable than most ponies out in the wasteland.” The griffin’s tone suggested there was more she wanted to add, but wasn’t going to insult the Steel Ranger who had just helped save her life. “They aren’t like zombie-ponies; although eventually... well, Sheriff Rottingtail was diving towards zombiehood, I’m pretty damn sure.”

“Oh?” SteelHooves asked in a manipulatively conversational tone I was beginning to recognize. I wondered if I should be worried. Did Blackwing or her griffins have anything to fear from SteelHooves? How about the ponies of Tenpony Tower?

I didn’t think so, but how well did I really know SteelHooves? How well could somepony know him when every show of opinion or emotion could be a cleverly crafted deception?

“Yeah. Sheriff Rottingtail didn’t want cohabitation, even if some of the Tenpony folk were willing to give it a go. That bastard had plans to wipe out everypony in that Tower and take it for himself and his crew.” Blackwing slashed at the air in disgust. “There’s a whole flock of zombie-ponies in the maintenance tunnels near Tenpony Tower. He tried to pay us to unlock an old tunnel entrance so he could let them swarm the place.”

SteelHooves was deathly silent for a moment. Then, “He tried to bribe you to break contract? Surely he had to know a griffin’s honor wouldn’t stand for that. Why didn’t he just do it himself?”

I saw how Blackwing puffed up with pride. “The fool couldn’t. Only unlocks from the inside.”

“By Luna!” SteelHooves gasped. “I hope you told Chief Grim Star about this?”

A grimace formed on Blackwing’s beak. “Actually...” She clawed at the ground. “I didn’t see any point in fueling that jerk’s bigotry after Sheriff Rottingtail had been taken out. Truth was, we didn’t even go in with the plan to take out more than him and his thugs, but the whole damn place fell upon us the moment we took him down. Didn’t have a choice but to kill them all.”

SteelHooves nickered. “Well, who can blame you. But Grim Star needs to know about that potentially fatal flaw in Tenpony’s security. Where is this old tunnel entrance, exactly?”



Butcher dropped her dismounted AA cannon battle saddle at my hooves. I blinked at her, not comprehending.

“Look, you saved our lives up there. We owe you,” Butcher explained. “Blackwing would probably make you an honorary Talon if you were at least a pegasus. But since you’re a unicorn, that just won’t fly.” She smirked at her own pun.

I stared down at the ridiculously huge gun. “I couldn’t, really,” I stammered, wondering just what the hell we would do with the thing if I accepted it. “You might need it.”

“Yeah, well, I need my life more. And I have that thanks to you lot. Blackwing’s Talons pay back their debts. And don’t you deny that you could use her. *Little Gilda* here will beat a hole through an alicorn’s shield if you can keep her on target for four or five shots of

concentrated fire.” She cocked her head. “Besides, the other idea was a set of our armor, but I don’t think it would fit a pony.”

Calamity flew up and hovered, staring at it. “Actually, Ah bet Ah could mount that girl onta SteelHooves’ battle saddle...”

“Where?” SteelHooves’ huge saddle already had a grenade machinegun on one side and a missile launcher on the other!

“On his back!” Calamity tipped his hat, warming to the idea. “Sure, she’d hafta be mounted aft-wards, so SteelHooves would hafta turn his tail t’ the target t’ shoot it, but if we rigged it into that fancy targeting magic...”

Oh no. I was stopping this insanity right there. SteelHooves, if anything, needed a weapon that was less overpowered; something he could safely shoot in hallways. “No... actually, how about you just owe us a favor?”

“I’m not much for owing favors that might come back to pluck my tail-feathers,” Blackwing, finally done talking with SteelHooves, broke into the conversation. “But if you can think up something more acceptable by the end of the week, we should still be in the area.”

Butcher looked to her team leader. “What’s the plan?” She laid down next to her battle saddle and started pulling it on. It was clearly far too heavy to lift without telekinesis.

“Finish the contract. Deliver the codes and get our payment. After that?” Blackwing looked behind her at the one other remaining member of her team, who was being virtually mummified by Velvet Remedy.

“By the Egg,” Blackwing swore, “I’ll figure something out.”

Calamity looked disappointed as Butcher re-saddled *Little Gilda*. “Ah dunno. How are we s’posed t’ find ya?”

Blackwing fished a small device from her saddlebags. It looked a lot like a StealthBuck. “Here’s a broadcaster. You can attach it to your PipBuck and use it to transmit radio messages as well as receive

them. Your PipBuck isn't a radio tower, so you won't have much range, but if you picked up our transmissions, you already know what frequencies to call on."

I nodded, floating it into my own saddlebags. First, I had to restore the spell matrix of my PipBuck. I could do it from SteelHooves' suit just as I had the reverse. But it was a complicated procedure that I couldn't do while hurt. Or in the dark. Or probably without Party-Time Mint-als.

No... No, I *could* do it without them. Even if I didn't *feel* like I could. I'd done it before, dammit.

SteelHooves trotted up to join us. I was tempted to ask him about his somewhat ominous conversation with Blackwing, but he drew my attention elsewhere. "We're being watched. There's a sprite-bot that's been trying to get your attention without letting me know it's there."

Watcher.



I excused myself to the little fillies' pile-of-rubble. Sure enough, the sprite-bot floated up to me, silent as the sunset.

"Hello Littlepip!" Watcher tried to sound casual, but this wasn't a chance meeting. If it was, I would have heard music first. "What are you all doing way out here? And what was that explosion?"

I wondered if Watcher was the shy follower SteelHooves and I had noticed before. I decided to try the theory.

"Well, Calamity has been playing with fireworks and SteelHooves has been letting you secretly follow us around all day without his knowing," I said darkly. "What are you doing?"

"All day? I don't know what you mean, Littlepip. I just got here."

Likely story. Didn't matter. I needed Watcher's help. "Watcher, I need a favor. I need you to contact Gawdyna and tell her about Blackwing's Talons."

Watcher was silent long enough that I felt pressed to explain.

“Gawdyna’s gathering up griffins who aren’t currently under contract. Blackwing lost half her griffins to those alicorns and the survivors are badly wounded. They could use more help than we can give them. We ought to at least let Gawdyna give them the option...”

“No,” the sprite-bot’s mechanical voice intoned.

“No?” I sat back, surprised. “Look, we can help these people. Or do you only care about ponies?”

“I’ve been willing to help you before because it was to *save lives*. This isn’t saving lives. It’s more like a... vanity project. I don’t reveal myself for a reason. Every time I do, it puts me at risk!”

Oh for the love of Luna. I turned away from the floating robot.

Then Watcher surprised me. “Fine. I’ll do this for you. But you have to agree to do something for me. I have a quest for you.”

“You have a what now?” I blinked, turning back and staring at the sprite-bot.

“There’s a Black Opal in Tenpony Tower. It was stolen from me. I want it back.”

Tentatively, I asked, “What’s a Black Opal?”

“It’s a special gemstone. It’s like a memory orb, but used in a Recollector.” Before I could ask what a Recollector was, Watcher enlightened me. “Memory orbs hold memories taken from others by unicorn magic, usually through force. A Recollector is an enchanted crown that someone can wear when they *want* to record what they are experiencing. Or to re-live such a recording. Even if the wearer isn’t a unicorn.”

I nodded. That sort of advancement made perfect sense. Like Apple Bloom’s magic-resistant terminals, I suspected it was a step forward in arcano-technology that came awfully close to the end. Otherwise, I’d have been stumbling over them everywhere.

“So you want me to get a memory orb, sorta, out of Tenpony Tower and bring it to you. What, do I look like a courier pony?” I

glowered. “But if this is what you require of me in order to be helpful, I’ll do it. Where is the thing?”

“I believe it was taken by that radio pony, DJ Pon3. Retrieve it for me and I will relay your message.”

Wait. *What?* Watcher wanted me to steal from Homage!?

“I... I...” I fought down a sense of inarticulate rage. “Okie... dokey... lokey. I’ll see what I can do.” My voice was sharp and even. “But you send the damn message first.”

The sprite-bot hovered while Watcher seemed to contemplate this.

“Of course. Trust goes both ways.”

Well, maybe. But Watcher just asked me to betray the trust of somepony I cared about. And right now I cared for and needed Homage a whole lot more than somepony hiding behind a sprite-bot and demanding favors in return for taking action. So I would ask Homage for the Black Opal. Nicely. And if she said no, Watcher was out of luck.

Suddenly, something else occurred to me. My eyes widened as I stared at Watcher’s sprite-bot.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You haven’t disappeared. All your little visits have been getting shorter. It’s almost like every time I start to ask a question that you’re uncomfortable with, your time in the sprite-bot conveniently ends. But now that you want something from me, you’ve...”

There was a burst of static and then happy marching music (heavy on tuba, drum and harmonica) poured out of the sprite-bot as Watcher ran out of time.

I wasn’t buying it.



The sun was beginning to rise, painting the clouds above with magnificent colors and plunging the city into a maze of deep shadows.

I would have enjoyed the walk back if the lack of my Eyes-Forward Sparkle wasn't making me dread every corner and shadow, unable to tell where enemies were lurking. If my foreleg wasn't throbbing. If my head wasn't pounding and my stomach twisting and clenching brutally. I had already vomited up everything I'd eaten ever.

I had come to a conclusion: I hated radiation sickness. Quite a lot. Tenpony Tower, Homage and bed seemed forever away.

Velvet Remedy had passed the RadAway out between us (excluding SteelHooves) before Blackwing's Talons took their leave. What wouldn't quite have been enough to purge the radiation from three of us was spread far too thin serving six. Velvet Remedy kept assuring us that we would be fine once we made it back to Tenpony Tower and she could get more supplies. Even though we weren't saying anything. Which made me even more worried.

I distracted myself by thinking about the memory orb. And that lead me to thoughts about the Ministry of (Wartime) Technology. Which lead me to recall SteelHooves' comment about the Ministry. And who they helped.

Companies like Ironshod, Four Stars, Equestrian Robotics and even Stable-Tec.

Ironshod Firearms: where I first learned that all was not well in Applejack's world. Equestrian Robotics: I really knew nothing about them for sure, but I heavily suspected the nightmare fuel that was brain-bots could be laid at their hooves. Four-Stars: the traitorous ponies who sheltered and worked with zebra infiltrators and who were largely responsible for the deaths of millions. And Stable-Tec... and I already knew how that worked out.

Under the Ministry's guidance and support.

I was brought out of my thoughts by Velvet Remedy's gasp. I had fallen behind, due as much to my mental wanderings as my size and

physical state. I tried to gallop up to where the rest of them were crouched behind a shattered wall, peeking out of half a window. Instead, I lurched and discovered that I actually did have just a little bit more I could throw up.

Wiping the sick from my muzzle with weak disgust, I approached a second window, not wanting to press close to the others after what I had done. Beside it was a metal desk; we were technically on the “inside” of the building, looking “out”. I paused to open the desk, finding a dozen bottle caps.

My fogged mind insisted on asking why I kept finding bottle caps in places like this. Desks. Trash cans. Lockers. Filing cabinets. What kind of pony went around putting money in random spots? What thought process leads to: *Oh, look! A desk in the urban wilderness. Let's put some caps in there. Not much -- just enough to buy a sandwich...?*

I shook my head, trying to rid my mind of the cobwebs that entangled such thoughts. The thudding of my headache spiked, letting me know that was the wrong thing to do.

Blinking back tears, I looked “out” at the street. I heard the odd, fluttery commotion before I saw the source. When I did, my eyes went wide. A moment later, a ball of green flame lit up the street as the balefire phoenix set one of the bloodwings attacking it ablaze. I stood there, gaping.

Not all my companions were content to just watch. Levitating out her combat shotgun, Velvet Remedy stepped through her window, much to our surprise.

Velvet Remedy was never the first into combat. The range of creatures she was willing to use lethal force against was growing, and now included alicorns. But it had always been in self defense, or the defense of other ponies. As I saw Velvet take a battle stance, lifting the shotgun towards the aerial skirmish, I remembered what Monterey Jack had said, and wondered if I was slowly losing her to demands of the Equestrian Wasteland as well. Was she losing herself?

Velvet Remedy waited until the sight of the balefire phoenix was entirely blocked by the body of a bloodwing.

BLAM!!

The giant bat let out a piercing screech and fell to the ground. Velvet Remedy turned her aim to another one, waiting for the opportune moment.

The bats weren't going to give it to her. One of them broke off, diving at my friend. There was a twin gunshot as Calamity entered the fray, and the bloodwing crashed meatily at Velvet Remedy's hooves.

The sky flashed with goutts of green as the balefire phoenix tried to swoop back around on its attackers. One of the bloodwings turned and collided with the majestic green and golden bird, and the two ploughed inside of the hulk of a delivery wagon, crashing through crates filled with destroyed books. Part of me wondered if the books had been headed towards Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum.

The balefire phoenix was pinned under the bloodwing. I could see it struggling to get out. Another bloodwing fluttered down to the mouth of the delivery wagon, then flapped back quickly as the phoenix spat green balefire at it. The beautiful creature let out a mournful cry as the bloodwing twisted its head about to sink its fangs into the bird. The second bloodwing descended into the opening.

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy shouted in dismay. "Your zebra rifle!" I started, looking to her in confusion as my PTM-less brain struggled to parse what she wanted me to do.

Velvet Remedy wasn't willing to wait. Her horn flared as she wrenched the zebra rifle out of its holding straps and started firing it wildly into the back of the wagon. In seconds, the entire interior was ablaze. The bloodwings screeched in agony. One of them stumbled out, walking bizarrely on its burning wings, a living inferno. It collapsed in the street.

Nothing else, neither balefire phoenix nor second bloodwing, emerged from the raging furnace that the book wagon had become.

I looked from the wagon to Velvet Remedy and back blankly. “But the...” Velvet Remedy gave me a strained glance, then returned to staring into the fire.

As I struggled to finish the thought, a blast of ash shot from the flames. It swirled in the morning air, catching the rays of sunlight as they pierced through the apocalyptic cityscape, spinning on a wind all its own. Then with a blinding burst of emerald light pierced with gold, the balefire phoenix appeared.

Velvet Remedy gave a joyous squeal. She watched as the strange but magnificent creature circled around us thrice, let out a musical cry, and soared off.

Floating the zebra rifle back to me, she smirked. “Not the same relationship with being burned alive, remember?”



“When we get back, I’m taking a long bath,” Velvet Remedy announced. “I’ll get the RadAway as soon as Doctor Helpinghoof’s clinic opens. At this rate, it won’t be long after we return.”

“Gaul-dangit, when we get back *Ah’m* takin’ a long bath!” Calamity exclaimed, prompting Velvet to mock-faint.

I just wanted to sleep. Preferably beside Homage. “I m...” I stopped, my mind fighting sickness, PTM-withdrawl and now sleep deprivation. “I dunno. I need sleep. But we don’t have much time.”

“Don’t ‘have much time? B’fore what?”

“Before Monterey Jack is executed,” I told Calamity bluntly. “We have to save him.”

The others, all of them, stopped in their tracks.

“We have t’ what now?” Calamity asked, as if I’d told him we all had to get bitten by rattlesnakes.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that,” I said, realizing my error. “*I* have to save him.”

“Pardon, but Ah still don’t think Ah heard that.”

“May I ask why?” Velvet Remedy questioned.

“Not to mention how?” SteelHooves added.

I turned to look at my surprised and uncooperative friends. It dawned on me that I had never mentioned to them my intention to save the unpleasant beige unicorn.

“Ah say let ‘im hang!” Calamity said, landing with an authoritative all-hoof stomp.

“You just met...” Velvet Remedy began, then stopped. “You’re going to get us all kicked out of Tenpony Tower to save the pony who tried to rob you? That is, if the guards don’t simply gun you down. Even though he confessed?”

I felt myself shaking. I was in no condition to be having this argument. Couldn’t they all just see that this was the right thing to do?

“Dammit, Littlepip!” Velvet Remedy was suddenly mad at me. Why was she mad at me? “Monterey Jack doesn’t get to do this! You saved that miserable bastard’s life, and he repaid you by trying to screw you! He doesn’t get to cheat you out of happiness too!”

I recoiled from Velvet Remedy’s language as much as her anger.

“I agree,” SteelHooves said simply.

Finally, I shot back at them, focusing on Velvet Remedy. “It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t matter if he’s worthy of saving or not. Everyone on the battlefield, Fluttershy said, right? That buck has kids! Two colts and a filly. What do you think will happen to them if he dies? Does Tenpony Tower strike you as the sort of place that comprehends charity? Did any of you see an orphanage in there while you were shopping around?”

I turned to Calamity and SteelHooves. “It doesn’t matter what I could lose if I do. But how about what I’ll lose if I don’t even try?”

Sometimes, to do what's right, you have to become the villain of the piece.

My friends all took a step back from me. They looked to each other as if wondering who should speak first. Finally, SteelHooves stepped forward. "Well then, what's the plan?"

Breathing a huge sigh of relief (and feeling suddenly so dizzy I had to fight not to drop to my knees), I explained:

"I have one StealthBuck left. I sneak in. Shoot him with a dart. Just one; the poison will paralyze him for a few hours but have no lasting effects. Then I pick the lock and float him onto my back. I'll use my levitation to lessen his weight. As long as I'm actually carrying him, the invisibility spell should cover both of us, just like it covers my saddlebags."

Velvet Remedy's eyes were wet, but she stepped forward. "In that case, we have something we must do before I can take my bath."

I looked to her questioningly, hopefully.

"We need to stop by that workstation so you can build a new dart gun."



I was dead on my hooves.

I could barely stand up; the workbench seemed to swim before me. Velvet Remedy was by my side though, encouraging me gently. Her attitude seemed to have completely changed after I mentioned the children. I was surprised but unquestioningly pleased.

"It's okay. You can do it. Just focus."

I nodded to Velvet's voice as I wonderglued the pieces of seemingly random junk into a potent hoof-made weapon. "There... it just needs to dry now."

Velvet Remedy nodded and gave me a little nuzzle. "Your heart is always in the right place, Littlepip." She backed up, giving me a sad smile. "Your mind maybe not so much. But I've learned to believe in your heart..." She looked down, scuffing the floor with her hoof. "I do care about you, you know."

I felt my heart flutter and my head swim. What was this? This wasn't her trying to hurt Calamity. Was she coming on to me? After pushing me towards Homage yesterday? No... I had to be reading this wrong.

I looked away, aching because I knew Homage was so close. My eyes caught a bit of red in the far corner under a blanket. "Hey...uh... Velvet, is that your wagon?" I asked, suspecting she had left it up here the morning before. I pictured Homage finding it and carefully setting it aside, even covering it... although I couldn't remember Velvet bringing it in the first place.

I looked to her again, and the thought left me. She looked beautiful and heart aching sad. Her eyes were glistening again, but she changed the subject. "How long?" she deflected, glancing again at the dart gun.

"Oh, wonderglue is..." I searched for a good word and failed. "Wondrous. No time at all. Hell, it's probably ready now."

"You have all the darts you need?"

"Only should need one." Although, I had to admit, I'd need a few dozen in the state I was in. I would be lucky to hit a barn door.

"Let me see," Velvet cooed. I floated out one of my poisoned darts and set it into the dart gun. Velvet Remedy wrapped her telekinesis around it and lifted it to her eye, checking the alignment. It occurred to me that a non-lethal weapon like the dart gun should hold quite the appeal for my more pacifistic friend.

I remembered my earlier worries. How much would Velvet Remedy benefit, psychologically and spiritually, from being able to handle enemies without further soaking her own hooves in blood and death? Dammit, why didn't I think of this before?

I turned to her, the promise to make her a dart gun of her own wet on my lips. And froze in bewilderment. Velvet Remedy had the dart gun pointed right at me. Didn't she know that wasn't safe?

Thwap!

Ow! I opened my mouth, words of surprise frozen on my tongue.

Velvet Remedy shed a tear as she said, "I'm sorry, Littlepip."

What.... What was happening?

Velvet Remedy's horn glowed a little brighter. I heard the squeaking as the small red wagon rolled over, stopping behind me. Velvet Remedy stepped closer and gave me a gentle nudge with one hoof, tipping my paralyzed body onto the wagon.

She'd shot me *on purpose!*

As Velvet Remedy floated the blanket over me, covering my body, I swore I'd kill her.



I don't know when I lost consciousness. The last moments I remembered were of feeling the vibration of the elevator through the metal edges of the wagon. A wagon which I should note had been very uncomfortable. I hadn't been able to see anything, and the only thing I could smell was the damn blanket. Mentally, I had realized I should be either seething with rage or sick with worry, perhaps even fearing for my life. But I had been too ill and too exhausted to have any emotions left.

I probably fell asleep.

Now, I found myself waking to the horrifyingly familiar sensation of being strapped to a medical table. A shot of panic went through me, driving me to struggle against the straps holding me down as I imagined that the psychotic ghoul doctor had somehow regenerated and captured me again. With Velvet Remedy's help!

I collapsed back, a black ache growing in my heart. How could she do this? She was supposed to be my friend!

I realized just how utterly horrible I felt. Beyond heartache, beyond headache and physical illness. I felt deeply and unbearably wrong inside. Was this how Taint felt? I tossed my head back onto my pillow (a little surprised my captors had thought to give me one).

Above me, somepony had nailed a poster to the wall. A very young mare dressed in a pink and yellow-striped nurse's uniform stared back at me, telling me how I didn't need to be a Steel Ranger to be a hero. Apparently, heroic positions like "Bedpan Unsullification Technician" and "Cancer Ward Clown" awaited me.

Not the Red Racer factory. My eyes strayed around. The medical bed I was strapped to was partitioned off by screens. I could see the silhouettes of ponies moving about beyond. The only thing in here with me was a strange, beeping terminal and several plastic tubes that were delivering fluids into and out of my body.

One of the shadows was Calamity. I could tell by the shape of his hat.

Dammit, NO! *Not him too!* Celestia and Luna damn them both to the burning...

"Dagnabbit," I heard Calamity speak, addressing one of the other ponies in the room, "Remember when we talked 'bout doin' this the right way? Well, this. Ain't. It."

"Do you think I wanted to do this?" Velvet Remedy's voice carried through the gauzy screens that locked me away. There was heartache in her voice. Good! "Littlepip forced my hoof."

"And how 'xactly did she do that? Ah seem t' recall her bein' barely able t' walk straight."

Suddenly, my body started to feel really heavy. Like a great leaden blanket was pressing down on me.

“Don’t be naive! You heard her. Monterey Jack’s execution is tomorrow. She was going to get herself kicked out of this place before we had any chance to persuade her to seek treatment.”

Oh. *That’s* what this was.

I opened my mouth to say something, but that heaviness washed over my eyelids and I couldn’t keep them open.



When I awoke again, I felt... better.

I was tired and weak, weary to my very bones, but in a way that felt normal. The headache and sickness were gone. I could see, hear, feel, *think*. Clearly. There was no fog to fight through.

I tried to sit up, but I was still firmly bound to the medical bed. A shot of panic went through me, but I fought to stifle it. I wasn’t back there. I wasn’t in the mad ghoul’s lab. This was different. And if I kept telling myself that, maybe my body would listen and my heart would slow to normal.

I laid back, already feeling exhausted by my effort to rise. I didn’t have the energy to fight it, but I did have enough to start to get mad. The only friends I’d ever had in my life had conspired against me. Velvet Remedy had paralyzed me. They had me strapped to a bed in a clinic barely a day after my terrifying experience with the ghoul doctor. They had force me into...

By the mercy of moon-banishment, I *knew* I had a problem. It wasn’t as if I was stupid. I just... Hell, I would have come here on my own. Eventually. I would have; I just had more important, pressing things...

A shadow moved up to the partition, and one of the screens was pulled away. A dark tan earth pony trotted into my little prison. Beyond him, I could see Velvet Remedy curled up on a bench. Her horn was glowing and a memory orb lay on the bench in front of her. She had retreated into the Fluttershy Orb again.

Goddesses! As if Velvet Remedy didn't have problems of her own.

I felt something hard in the pit of my stomach. I had every right to be furious with her, and I was. But I couldn't be hateful. Instead, even with my anger on, I felt a pang of worry for her.

"Well, good morning," the stallion said. "I'm Doctor Helpinghoof. And you, I've been told, are Littlepip. How are you feeling this morning?"

I turned my anger towards him. I didn't know quite how much of it he deserved, but it was at least some. After all, he'd agreed to put me through his addiction cure very much without my permission; I was paralyzed at the time. Plus, he was very, very convenient.

"That's a really stupid name."

The doctor took none of the intended offense. "Yes, I suppose you're right. I changed my name when I decided to take over the clinic. The Helpinghoof Clinics were prewar centers for aid and rehabilitation. Maybe it was presumptuous of me."

I sighed and shook my head. "No. That... makes sense." Doctor Helpinghoof was a.... homage to the Helpinghoof Clinics. I felt a smile curling my muzzle despite myself. I fought it off, finding my righteous anger again.

"Why am I strapped down?!" I demanded.

Helpinghoof genially answered, "The addiction treatment involves a complete flushing of your system. You really don't want to pull out any of the tubes while the process is in progress. You could cause yourself permanent harm."

Oh. "But, why am I *still* strapped down?"

"Well, honestly, because the first reaction of most patients in your position is to gallop off. And all too often, imbibe more of whatever drug I just cleaned them of."

"My choice, isn't it?"

“Yes, that’s certainly true. And with friends like yours, I have no doubt that you’d find yourself back here tomorrow if you did. I could make a tidy profit off of you.”

I glared at the ceiling. “I need new friends!” I was rapidly running out of ones who hadn’t shot me.

“That attitude is not unexpected. No good deed, and all those horseapples,” the doctor said. “But in your case, I’m keeping you strapped until I’m sure you’re not going to do something too exertive.” I gave him a dark look, but he shrugged it off.

“When you came in here, Party-Time Mint-al addiction was hardly your only ailment. You were suffering severe radiation exposure. Not to mention a small dose of manticore poisoning. And your body had clearly been through enough traumas in the last few weeks that it was on the verge of giving out. I had to do a lot of work before I could risk even beginning the treatment.” The doctor spoke with earnest warning, “These procedures have left you in a weak and fragile state. You’ll heal properly now. But you need to take it easy for the next few days at least. No strenuous activity.”

I remained quiet as that soaked in. How bad a shape had I been in? And if I was that messed up, how bad were the others. “Doctor, my... ‘friends’? They’ve been through as much as I have. Please, they need your help too.”

Helpinghoof nodded. “I know. Your unicorn friend already insisted. The Steel Ranger won’t even let me take a look, but I’ve had both Calamity and Velvet Remedy on my table while you were in recovery.”

Of course. SteelHooves wouldn’t want anyone here realizing what he was. “Will they be okay?”

“Physically, yes,” the doctor said. “Although I suspect how well they heal emotionally will be more up to you than to me.”

Great. Drop that load on me too. I wasn’t even going to get to be mad at them.

“Now, I want to talk to you a little bit about addictions,” Helpinghoof informed me.

Perfect. And now the lecture. And he even had me strapped down for it.

“You should have noticed by now that your senses and thought processes seem clearer and cleaner. Not as hyper-enhanced as when you are on the drugs, but still a lot better than when you were off of them. Am I right?”

Grudgingly, I nodded.

“That’s the nasty double-edge of Party-Time Mint-als. They are a brain accelerator made from mystical plants native only to zebra lands and perhaps the Everfree Forest. No matter how often you use them, they will always be just as effective as the first time. What most addicts don’t realize, however, is that the withdrawal degrades your mental facilities. The more you take them, the worse you are when you’re not on them. Ponies who have been taking them for years have reached the point where they can barely function without the drug in their system.”

Helpinghoof smiled thinly. “The enlightened state in which you find yourself now is actually the way you always had been before you got hooked on Party-Time Mint-als.”

What? I was like this before? But I felt so much more alert. Everything was so clear. It was so easy to think. Not hyper-fast like I could when I was on a PTM, but still *easy*. If this was what I was like before PTMs, why did it feel so new? And why wasn’t I able to tell...

But I had been able to tell. I had known something was wrong for a long time. I felt a tear in my eye and I wondered where it had come from. I looked to the doctor.

“Now, I can give you advice, but I can’t make you take it,” the doctor continued. “You absolutely need to stay away from Party-Time Mint-als. It won’t be easy. Your body and brain might no longer crave or need them, but most drug addiction is as psychological as it is

physical. So I can't tell you this won't be difficult. But from what I hear, you have a strong will, and you have strong friends who can help you through it."

I nodded slowly, not really wanting to hear this, but knowing I needed to.

"And I highly recommend staying away from normal Mint-als, or for that matter any other addictive substances. Buck, Rage, Dash... all of them. Party-Time Mint-als is the most addictive drug out there, but many of the others aren't much better. And with your family history, you are more susceptible to addictions than most ponies; so my advice is to just stay away."

I started to nod again and stopped. Wait. "What does my family have to do with this?"

"Predisposition towards addiction can be hereditary," Helpinghoof informed me. "Your friend Velvet Remedy told me about your mother."

"My *mother*?" She had *no right!*

"She was an alcoholic, was she not?"

I ground my teeth, staring everywhere but at the doctor. He waited patiently until my spit and fury subsided enough to answer, "Well, her cutie mark was a glass of hard apple cider. What else was she going to do?"

"You do know that cutie marks don't control your destiny, right?"

I just looked away. I wasn't going to be roped into a discussion of my mother. Even if they kept me tied down for days.

Oh crap. Monterey! How long had I been out?

I tried to look at the time on my PipBuck but my foreleg was strapped down. And, I remembered swiftly, my PipBuck was dead anyway.

"Doctor," I said, trying not to sound too anxious. "How long until Monterey Jack is executed?" Please, Luna, give me the strength...

The doctor blinked. "The cheese shop owner? That was two hours ago." I felt an weight the size of a flower pot drop in my stomach. Followed by an anvil. "Why, did you know him?"

I had failed.



Velvet Remedy was the first to visit me, fresh from Fluttershyland. She spoke cautiously, trotting on eggshells. As she did so, her horn glowed as she removed the straps holding me down, one at a time. I resisted the urge to go for her throat. No strenuous activity, the doctor had said.

"I don't expect you to forgive me..." Velvet was saying.

"Good," I interrupted harshly. "Because I don't."

She winced at my words, but obstinately continued, "...or that things will be right between us. But I do expect you to understand why. And to understand why I had to do it now."

"Why you felt you had to do it now, you mean," I spat. "And against my will."

"You wouldn't have gotten the help you needed on your own. This might be the only place in the whole Equestrian Wasteland that could help you, and you were about to throw it away."

"I had already realized I had a problem," I retorted. "I was going to ask for help."

"Oh?" Velvet Remedy asked, trapped somewhere between shock and disbelief. "When?"

"After we crashed. I realized it then. And I was probably going to ask for help after I'd had some sleep."

"Convenient." She turned away from me. I didn't need to see her face to tell she was hiding tears. I could hear them in the tremble of her breath, see it in the shudder of her breast.

Arrrgh! I wanted to tear her to pieces with my teeth... and yet I couldn't bear to see her hurt. And I knew that if talked to her any more, I'd just hurt her more. Maybe she deserved it, but I didn't want to inflict more wounds.

"Velvet, you need to not be here."

She wiped a hoof across her face before looking at me. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she didn't let me see the actual tears.

"Because of what you did, Monterey Jack's children are without a guardian and will soon be without a home," I said sternly, staring at her. To her merit, she stood and took it.

I had asked the doctor what would become of them. I had been right that Tenpony Tower has nothing like an orphanage; I recalled the doctor's words: Tenpony Tower is a "meritocracy" according to Helpinghoof, not a socialist commune. Those who have not earned their right to be here, and who cannot afford the privilege to be here, have no place here. The colts and filly would be kicked out of the Tower at the end of the month.

"So you have to help fix it. Send SteelHooves in here. I need to talk to him. And have him bring my saddlebags and utility barding. I need to get my PipBuck running so I can send Blackwing's Talons a message. I'm calling in the favor they owe us; I'm going to have them take the children to Shattered Hoof." I frowned. It wasn't ideal, but it was a damn lot better than what those kids would face alone in the Manehattan Ruins.

"It will be your job to break the news to Monterey's children, and persuade them to go."

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened, immediately recognizing how emotionally painful the task I had given her would be. But she nodded, accepting the burden as due reward.



“Ah’m so sorry, Li’lpip,” Calamity said, head in his hooves. He had slipped inside the partitions as soon as Velvet Remedy had left.

I took a deep breath and gingerly sat up. It was an effort to do so, but my head remained clear and my gut didn’t lurch. It was blissful to not be sick or under the effects of withdrawal.

“You have nothing to apologize for, Calamity,” I said, although the angry pony in the back of my head had a few differing opinions. “Velvet Remedy did this. And she... was right to want to help me. I needed help.”

Calamity looked up to me. I was shocked to see deep pain in his eyes. “No, Littlepip. Ah have the most t’ apologize fer. This is all muh fault! Ah’m the one who gave ya those zebra-damned mints in the first place.”

Flaming sun-farts. Calamity was right. For the first time, I considered what seeing me losing it to those things must be doing to him. Had he been tearing himself up all this time? Oh merciful Celestia, what had I been doing to my friends?

Strenuous or not, I pushed myself from the medical bed and threw my forehooves around Calamity, nuzzling against his neck. I had no words, no idea what to say. But I hoped that if I hugged him long enough, he’d understand how forgiven he was, and how sorry I was.



I had a *lot* of apologizing to do.

“How are *you* doing?” I asked SteelHooves as I plugged my PipBuck up to his magically powered armor using tools from my utility barding.

“Shouldn’t you be the one everypony is asking that?” SteelHooves deep voice questioned.

“I’ve been... out of it for a long time,” I admitted. “I’ve missed things. Obvious things. Or, at least, been too slow in coming to them.” I swallowed. “For example, you told me that the Ministry of

Technology funded Four Stars. And then you discovered what they did. I can't imagine how that must have hit you..."

"I've been... dealing with it," SteelHooves cut me off.

"But you shouldn't have had to deal with it alone." I shook my head. "I'd focused on Velvet Remedy and Calamity, and I didn't even see that *all* my friends were hurting. Not just the loud ones."

SteelHooves nickered. "Thank you, Littlepip. But like I said, I'm handling it."

I nodded, respecting his determination. My PipBuck beeped, demanding my attention. "Okay. But I am here for you. Really here, now," I added. "If I can help at all. If you just need somepony to talk to."

"I'd rather not."

I shut up. For the next half of an hour, I focused on getting my PipBuck working again. By the time I was done, the little leg-worn device was operating more smoothly and efficiently than it had in months. I floated the broadcaster out of my saddlebags and sent Blackwing the message. She was annoyed by the task I required of her but more relieved that I'd contacted her so quickly, calling in the favor for something that didn't amount to anything worse than an annoyance.

"By the Great Egg, kid, I'm half tempted to call this three favors. But then, I'd have to figure out how many more I owed you for hooking us up with Gawdyna's Shattered Hoof operation. I was feeling like my wings had been pulled for a bit there."

"Thank you, Blackwing. Velvet Remedy will have the little ponies waiting for you at the Four Stars station at Tenpony Tower."

I cut the broadcast. SteelHooves remained silent for a while longer.

"Are you sure...?" I began to ask as I put my tools away.

"Littlepip, you're the sort of mare who makes me wish I was a better pony." He sounded... sad? "Only one other mare has ever made me

feel that way. And sooner or later, you're bound to learn, just like she did, that I'm not a better pony."

SteelHooves walked out of Helpinghoof's clinic.



"Where's SteelHooves?"

"Should ya really be up, Li'l pip?" Calamity asked, his eyes widening with concern as I burst into the suite.

"Do you know where he is?" After SteelHooves had left, I had just stared. It took several minutes for the sinking sensation to fully prompt me to action. And by then, I had lost track of him.

"uh... well, last Ah saw, he was talkin' t' Chief Grim Star."

No! I turned and galloped for the elevator.



It took me too long -- way too long -- to find the door to the basement. I pushed myself beyond the point where I should have collapsed, racing an invisible clock. When I found the door, my state of alarm intensified. It should have been locked. Instead, the door hung slightly open. I dashed inside, then stopped, leaning against a cold concrete wall, fighting loss of breath.

The basement was a cluttered maze. The walls down here were too thick for my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to detect ponies, friend or foe, beyond the room I was in. I was forced to search by sight alone. Finally, in a back room, I found a heavy set of doors under an ancient warning sign whose paint was peeling:

Emergency Shelter

Authorized Unicorns Only

Like the door to the basement, these doors were open. My PipBuck lit up. One friendly pony.

“SteelHooves?”

I turned on the light of my PipBuck and saw the Steel Ranger standing in the gloom, facing another large door made of thick steel, inset with a tiny window of armored glass. There was a control panel inches from his raised right hoof.

“SteelHooves!” I called out, panting, a burning stitch in my sides. “Don’t do it!”

The Steel Ranger lowered his armored hoof and turned to look at me. “Don’t do what?” he asked so casually I wanted to scream.

”Don’t let them in!”

The Steel Ranger cocked his head. “Oh. Don’t worry, Littlepip. Nopony’s getting in through this door. I’ve made sure it can’t be used ever again.”

What? Oh. Oh thank the Goddesses! I collapsed on the cold stone floor, feeling like I would never be able to stand again. But it was okay. All my fears had been in my head.

SteelHooves trotted up to me. “Did you really think I’d let in the zombie-ponies. That I’d allow all the innocent ponies in Tenpony Tower to perish? You really don’t know me at all, do you.”

He trotted past me, leaving me there.

No, I admitted, feeling utterly ashamed as well as beyond exhausted. No, I didn’t know SteelHooves. And maybe it was time that I stopped thinking ill of my friends. Start trusting them more. They really are good ponies. And they really are trying to help.

My thoughts were interrupted by a thud. Chief Grim Star’s face appeared on the other side of the window. Flesh had been torn from the side of his head. I could see him staring in with desperation and horror, pounding on the other side of the door.

Then the zombie-ponies fell upon him once again, pulling him away from the window as they tore him to pieces, eating him alive.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Reaper Pony's Gallop - If you kill a target while using S.A.T.S., 25% of your AP are restored after dropping the spell. This will usually refresh your targeting spell enough to use it again immediately for at least one more attack.

CHAPTER TWENTY



BEHIND THE CURTAIN

"Can I do something for you? ... Or to you?"

Failure.

I couldn't save Monterey Jack. I couldn't stop SteelHooves from murdering Chief Grim Star.

I was letting down my friends and everyone who needed me. The realization of what I had been doing to those closest to me with my damn addiction cut deep. And as much as I wanted to rage at Velvet Remedy, it was my fault that Monterey Jack was dead. I'd killed him with a mint. Actually, I'd killed him with a whole lot of them. I had been eating them like... dammit, they actually tasted like candy; how fucking wrong is that?

I was physically exhausted and mentally overwhelmed, on the verge of crying.

It took me a long time to pull myself up off the floor and make my way back. The basement was huge, cluttered, maze-like. I took a wrong turn and found myself in a room full of spark-powered generators, half

of which were running, making the whole room seem to throb. A bank of them on the far wall were burned and blackened, their metal skins ruptured. One exploded generator was randomly sparking, making the air taste like lightning. The skeleton of a pony, severed in two by a hunk of metal shrapnel, rested forever on the floor a few yards from them. An engineering schematic on the wall told me these had been the generators which powered the Ministry's mystical defenses. They had given their lives saving the building and its inhabitants from the Manhattan balefire bomb... well, all except for one very unlucky maintenance pony. I wondered what her (or his) name had been. Did the pony have a family? Did they know what happened?

All moot two hundred years later. Just one more tear.

I backtracked and finally found my way to the exit. As I stepped out through the basement doorway, I was greeted by two of Tenpony Tower's guard ponies.

"Littlepip. You need to come with us."

I stared at them, then back to the open basement door. Was I being arrested? A weight sunk in my heart. They must think that I was responsible for the disappearance of Chief Grim Star. That was... fast. But then, I had been running around like a madpony earlier. And here I was, leaving the scene of the crime.

Because today just couldn't get any worse.

I nodded to the guards, saying nothing, and let them escort me to the constabulary offices. I'd been here before. I wondered if any of the ponies I had played seductress with in order to get a private audience with Monterey Jack would be there. They wouldn't need to execute me; I could simply die from embarrassment.

One thing was for sure. I wasn't going to say anything. I knew what SteelHooves had done, but what would be the use of pointing a hoof? I'd learned that lesson with Monterey Jack.

Ponies turned to stare as they marched me through the Tenpony Constabulary. I could half-hear the whispers that followed in my

passing. I recognized a few of the guards on duty, including the one I had sweet-talked into giving me his pencil so I could write down all the ideas that my PTM-fueled brain had been devising. I dropped my head, wanting to crawl.

I glanced up as we passed several guard ponies talking with SteelHooves. From the look of things, he was here of his own volition. That did not bode well.

"In here, please," one of my escorts demanded. To my surprise, the door he swung open for me wasn't to a cell, but to a nice-looking office paneled in fake wood and full of bookshelves. "Take a seat. And don't wander off. Somepony will be with you shortly."

I looked to him in confusion.

"Sorry about the delays. We've had a situation with the Chief; you're not our first priority today."



I was so weary that I sank onto the little couch in the office and didn't move, waiting for what seemed like hours. I checked my PipBuck. It was getting late. I was hungry. And confused.

There was a small radio on a desk corner. I turned it on, wanting to lose myself in DJ Pon3's music. Instead, I was shocked to hear SteelHooves' deep voice rumble from the box.

"I'm no hero.

"If you're looking for a hero, look to Chief Grim Star. He bravely sacrificed himself to save all of you. I only wish I could have saved him.

"Sheriff Rottingtail had been gathering a veritable army of zombie-ponies in the maintenance tunnels surrounding Tenpony Tower. There is a door in the basement through which the Sheriff was going to unleash them upon the innocent residents of this tower. It would have been a slaughter. The Talons hired by the Chief learned of this threat, but were not pleased with how things went down (when I encountered the Talons there were considerably fewer of them than when Chief Grim Star hired them) so they

neglected to inform the Chief of any of this, leaving all of your lives in jeopardy.

"When I informed the Chief, he insisted we go down to investigate the Talons' story. We found the door and ventured through with the intention of making sure it could not be opened from the outside. We were destroying the terminal that controlled the door access from the maintenance tunnels when the zombie-ponies attacked us en masse. Only my armor saved me.

"I still remember the Grim Star's last words, ordering me to flee, close the door, and make sure it was disabled from inside the Tower as well. He stayed back, fighting to the bitter end, sacrificing himself to give me the time needed. To make sure Tenpony Tower was, and is, safe."

I stared at the radio. By Celestia's mane, he was actually going to pull this off, wasn't he? There was so much truth woven into the story that it would hold up to investigation. And anypony who questioned it would be questioning the heroism of Chief Grim Star. I knew different, but I was the only one, and it would be my word against his. My very non-citizen word. Not that I would say anything. I'd already made the mistake of going down that path.

DJ Pon3's voice was now on the radio. "...from an interview an hour ago with one of my faithful assistants. The Tenpony Constabulary has confirmed the Steel Ranger's tale based on a computer entry left by Chief Grim Star..."

Oh. Wait... was that why he trotted into here? My lockpicking skills seemed virtually unique, but I doubted my ability to hack a terminal was nearly so rare. And if anypony could do it, who was more likely than a "knight of the Ministry of Technology"? It was just a guess, a suspicion, but it struck me that SteelHooves was covering his bases. Part of me almost admired what he was capable of. Part of me was angry that he was using *Homage's* broadcast, dedicated to the truth of the wasteland (no matter how bad it hurt), to spread his lies.

I turned off the radio.



Somepony finally arrived to speak with me. The debonair gentlestallion who took his place on the other side of the desk was a mottled brown unicorn with glasses perched on his nose and a scroll for a cutie mark.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

I nodded glumly. I was no longer curious why I was here. I just wanted to get whatever it was over with so I could go.

The unicorn levitated several scrolls onto the desk and opened them.

“Now you should be aware that there are expenses that have to be accounted for. The cost of the rope used to hang Monterey Jack was thirty bottle caps... fine stuff, premium made. Cost for the executioner was twenty-five bottle caps. Then there are cremation expenses...” The stallion looked over his glasses at me. “Unless, of course, you would rather they just throw his body out into the street for the birds.” His tone suggested that would be looked on as uncivilized, but that he was required to give me the option. “Cremation itself is one hundred caps, plus an additional fifty-seven for the basic box...”

I stared with dawning comprehension. *I was going to have to pay for Monterey Jack’s execution?* I was dumbfounded. How in Equestria did that make in sense?

But, I thought as I sank into depression, it did make sense... it was my fault that he was dead. Why shouldn’t I have to pay for it? I listened dispiritedly as the list of fees and expenses and legal charges grew and grew.

“...one year’s rent for both the cheese shop and his private quarters. Amounting to seven thousand and two hundred bottle caps. All together, required expenses and fees amount to a total of nine thousand and fourty-seven bottle caps.”

I stared vacantly for a moment. Then nodded. With a sigh, I asked, “How long do I have to pay this? I don’t have that kind of money.” As a group, we had easily more than double that, but I couldn’t feel right about draining such a huge amount of bottle caps from what was

Calamity and Velvet Remedy's money as well. (SteelHooves' too, although I felt less of a pang about that.)

The gentlestallion just blinked at me.

Perfect. By their standards, I was poor. "I mean, I could probably pay about half of it now..."

Giving me an odd look, the stallion informed me, "It's already been taken out of the accounts. Unfortunately, Monterey Jack didn't have sufficient funds to pay for all of it in caps, so a fair amount of personal property was confiscated for auction in accordance to..." he droned off legalese that went completely over my mane.

Confusion scrambled my thoughts. So I didn't have to pay for Monterey Jack's execution? Then why pull me in here to tell me all this? Did they just assume I wanted to know? So I could gloat? Was I legally required to gloat?

The gentlestallion was staring at me again. A frown broke across his face. "Well, I just lost that bet," he muttered to himself. Then, addressing me, "You have no idea why you're here, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Monterey Jack was convicted of attempted banditry. You were the pony he tried to rob. Therefore, upon his death, all of his properties are legally yours."

What? Wait... *WHAT!?* It was bad enough when I thought I was being punished; I had made peace with that because I deserved no less for my stupidity and failure. Now I was being *rewarded* for it? No! The world did not get to be that fucked up! I refused to let it.

The stallion considered me. "Honestly, there are a number of ponies who suspected that Monterey Jack's confession might have been more from the magic of your horn than the weight of his conscience," he informed me. I remembered the whispering as I passed by. Of course they did. Anypony who knew about this twisted bit of legalese would suspect me. Even I hadn't been able to comprehend why Monterey Jack had confessed until I'd talked with him privately.

The legal stallion continued, "I personally had laid good caps that this was some sort of plot cooked up between you and Monterey Jack." Again he frowned. "Clearly not."

I started at that. "What? He died. What kind of plan would that have been?"

The stallion shrugged. "We all know Monterey Jack hadn't been right since his wife died."

After Clarinet was killed, I'm all they have left.

"Clarinet, right?" I asked, and the legal stallion nodded. "He mentioned his wife. What happened to her?"

"There's a rumor that there is an untouched Stable somewhere in Fetlock. Few months back they were trying to find it. Never did; nobody has..."

My heart sank. It was absurd to feel guilty for having found Stable Twenty-Nine myself, wasn't it?

"...She was killed by a manticore. According to Monterey Jack, he killed the thing, but not before it had stung them both and torn her up right bad. Poor fellow only had enough anti-venom for one and she insisted he use it himself. With her wounds, according to Monterey, she probably wouldn't have made it even if he had given it to her." The stallion shook his head. "Of course, that's just how Monterey's told it. But I've never known the stallion to lie before."

Sweet, merciful Celestia.

The legal stallion cleared his throat and turned back to the documents in front of him. "Returning to the matter at our hooves: even after fees and deductions, you are still left with the private quarters, the deed and business license of the shop, and a modest amount of home furnishings. Of course, there are two matters which must be attended to."

This was so wrong. I couldn't be gaining property from Monterey's tragedy. I just... I couldn't accept this. I didn't deserve this.

“First, of course, is the simple fact that you are not a citizen of Tenpony Tower. And as such, you are not permitted to operate a business within the Tower. Normally, it takes several years to earn citizenship. But with the legal standing of these properties, if you started applications now, you could possibly achieve citizenship within little more than a year.” He looked over his glasses, fixing me with a stare. “Still, it is this office’s recommendation that you sell off the deed and business rights to the shop to some mare or gentlecolt who is a citizen. Make yourself a tidy little sum and be done with it.”

I nodded. I wondered if Homage had any use for an ex-cheese shop?

“Second is the matter of Monterey Jack’s children...”

My ears shot up. What was this?

“...who are legally allowed to remain in the private quarters until the end of the month. So while you do legally own the property, I’m afraid you won’t be able to kick them out until the first of...”

I felt like I’d been hit by a piano.

By the twisted legal fuckery of Tenpony Tower, *I* was the one bucking Monterey Jack’s filly and colts into the deadly wasteland!

I felt I was finally seeing behind the curtain. Monterey Jack’s execution made me, the heroine his children worshiped, into the pony stealing their home from them just after their father died. The ultimate buck when they’re down. Unless, of course, I did something about it....

...exactly like I had already done. I’d taken care of them even before this trap had snapped shut.

I looked up at the stallion as a new feeling burned away my depression: anger.



“He played me!”

I screamed at the walls of my suite, telekinetically overturning all of the beds. My eyes were burning with tears. My heart pounded with rage.

“He set me up!” I made the blankets tornado about the room. “I was the goody four-shoes filly he knew he could manipulate. And he was right!” I stomped on all hooves. The blankets soared at the window and rebounded off the glass.

I hated Monterey Jack. I wanted him dead. But he was already dead, and I wasn’t somepony who could change her mind and take my frustrations out on his children. He was *so* right about me. So instead, I took my fury out on my room and was thankful that none of my companions were around to see me do it.

It was too much. The shame of my addiction, the pain of how I’d hurt my friends, the betrayal of Velvet Remedy’s actions, and now Monterey Jack’s four-hooved fucking of me from beyond the grave.

I hurled one of my saddlebags against the wall. If levitation could have any real force behind it, I probably would have punched a hole in the room. As it was, the saddlebag just clanked against the wall, opening and spilling its contents. A lifetime’s worth of Party-Time Mint-als rained down on the floor. The stash from Pinkie Pie’s safe.

I stared at the pile of tins, frozen in place.

It took only a moment to transfer all my rage and sorrow onto the drugs. Before I knew it, I was in the bathroom, dumping tin after tin into the toilet water, cursing them and myself for everything we had done to my life together.

Flush. There went a months worth. *Flush.* There went dozens more.

I was throwing way countless bottle caps’ worth of them... and good riddance. They would never have the chance to hurt anypony else.

Flush. There went what I allowed myself to become dependent upon.

Flush. What I had let come between me and ponies who were closer to me than any family had ever been.

I was crying so hard I could barely see what I was doing. But I didn’t need to.

Flush. Flush. Flush.



The last tin of Party-Time Mint-als floated in front of me, hovering over the toilet, open. I just had to tilt it and flush. Easiest thing in the world. Telekinetic child's play. A tilt and a flush.

The tin hovered there, not tilting.

The last tin.

For all the damage they had done... that I had let them do... Party-Time Mint-als *had* saved my life, and the lives of my friends. More than once.

Should I keep just one tin? Just in case?

But if I took even one more, I could become addicted again. It only took one the first time. And I couldn't do that to myself. I wasn't Monterey Jack. I wasn't willing to screw me over like that.

The tin started to tip.

But what if that mental clarity was the only thing which could save my friends? What if it was Calamity's life on the line? Or Velvet Remedy's? Or SteelHooves? Wouldn't they be worth the sacrifice of myself?

Yes. Yes they would.

The tin leveled and began floating back towards me.

But... could I do that to them? Put them through it all again? And wouldn't it be a betrayal to even keep one tin?

The tin stopped, floating above the lip of the toilet.

"Littlepip?" Homage's voice startled me from the bathroom doorway. My magic imploded, dropping the tin into the toilet, metal case and all.

I looked at her, startled, eyes red and puffy, knowing I looked like a completely ugly mess.

Homage stepped into the bathroom, looking peaceful and elegant in her dress. I cringed back, not wanting to accidentally touch it with my filthy body. She didn't let me get away. She grabbed me, pulling me against her breast. I couldn't contain myself anymore, and broke into open weeping.

I heard the metal tin as Homage levitated it out of the water and dropped it into the pile with all the empty others

Flush.



At some point, Homage nudged me from my suite up to the Athenaeum where she lived. She played soft music and stayed close to me, leaving DJ Pon3's broadcast on a news-less loop of songs.

"How long before this makes the news cycle," I asked wearily as the sun was beginning to set.

Homage gave me a gentle but reproachful look. "Toaster Repairpony Kicks Addiction -- more at the top of the hour?" The pretty grey unicorn gave me a nudge with her nose. "Really? I don't think that's something for the airwaves, do you?"

I smiled gratefully to her.

"Let me cook you something to eat," Homage said before she dared leave my side. I realized how badly I was starving. I hadn't eaten for... the better part of two days?

Homage put to shame the restaurants of Tenpony Tower with their woven fried banana puree and whatnot. Simple, delicious cooking. And she didn't mind cooking more when I finished off everything and was still hungry.

After dinner, I was feeling tired and emotionally drained, not to mention very full, but I now had enough energy to help her clean up.

"Where did you learn to cook like that?" I asked, wishing we had someone with even half her skill traveling with us. I was sorely tempted

to suggest she join us (and not just for her food), but I knew she was needed here. All of the Equestrian Wasteland depended on DJ Pon3.

“My delinquent youth,” she hinted with a wink. I pressed her with a hoof, and she elaborated. “I really was an assistant to the last DJ Pon3. That’s how I took up the mantle when he fell ill; I was the only one who knew him. The magic voice spell has been passed down for at least five DJ Pon3’s, so the wasteland never knows there has been a change.”

I nodded, having suspected as much.

“I spent several years after getting my cutie mark running around the Manehattan Ruins and beyond with Jokeblue, a close friend...” The friend, I realized, that she had mentioned before. “...The area between here and Fillydelphia wasn’t as deadly then as it is now. I hunted for recordings and memory orbs to give to DJ Pon3, in the hopes that they would have new music or useful news for the broadcasts. Did other errands for DJ Pon3. Earned my way into the Tower. Learned how to survive along the way. Cooking, weapon maintenance, a lot of practice hacking computers to get into locked doors and safes.”

I thought of all the hacking and lockpicking I had done, driven largely by curiosity and a need to explore and to know. Even if what I learned didn’t mean anything. Like keeping the memory was an acknowledgement of and tribute to the past.

“Jokeblue was the one who knew her way around weapons and had the skill to disarm traps...” Homage trailed off as a clearly painful memory hit her.

“Do you... want to talk about it?”

Homage smiled, a tear in her eye. “...most traps. Some cruel bastard rigged up a baby carriage with explosives, used the corpse of a newborn colt and a recording of a baby’s crying to lure victims in.” I cringed, horrified. “By the time she was close enough to realize the baby was dead, it was too late to run. She tried to disarm it, but...” The dear unicorn’s voice broke off, choked.

Now it was my turn to hold Homage.



I stretched out on Homage's bed as she gave me a massage. Either she had learned a lot from our visit to the spa, or she'd had practice. Either way, it was wonderful! If I was a cat, I would have been purring.

I felt her press against me as she leaned close to whisper in my ear. "I know you're under doctor's orders to relax and not exert yourself. You listen about as well as most of his patients."

I nodded, not wanting to really talk about that. Or really about anything. What she was doing with her hooves was divine. She was pressing them in circles against the back of my legs at the base of my rump. Not as skilled as the professional spa ponies, maybe. But unspeakably more delightful because it was Homage doing it.

"So I won't apologize for helping you break them further." I had no idea what she was... oh HELLO! I gasped as I felt her tongue someplace I had only imagined it before. Pleasure burst through my whole body.

And she was just getting started. This was definitely going to qualify as *strenuous activity*.



I sat up, startled, my gaze drawn to the dark window.

Beside me, Homage stirred in the bed, opening an eye as she magically shifted the covers. "Littlepip?" she questioned sleepily.

I told her I thought I'd seen a flash of green outside the window. It reminded me of the flash I'd noticed in the fog nearly a week ago.

"Probably just a balefire phoenix," Homage dismissed, nuzzling close. "There are several of them in Manehattan."

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I think this one has been following us."



We spent the next morning together. Homage left the bed long enough to cook us breakfast. And then again a couple hours later to poke around in the Emergency Broadcast Station above us. The news this time included a retelling of my “brave and daring rescue” of Blackwing’s Talons, including congratulations from DJ Pon3 on once again stomping two eggs under one hoof -- apparently *I* had taken out three alicorns single-hoofedly by blowing up a raider compound. I buried my head under the sheets. It shouldn’t have surprised me. (In fact, I would have been surprised if Calamity hadn’t given her express permission to lay that at my hooves.) Homage had proven she really did enjoy making me squirm. Every way she could.

She was gone for the better part of an hour, leaving me to my thoughts. When she returned, I had reluctantly decided to broach an uncomfortable topic. The Black Opal.

“That thing?” she asked, immediately knowing what I was talking about. I expected her to ask why I wanted it, but instead, “How did you know I had one of those?”

I bit my lip. “A... and acquaintance wants me to ‘procure it’.” I looked away, then back into her eyes. “I was very tempted to tell the pony to just fuck off. But I figured I would ask. Please, feel free to say no. I don’t want anything to come between us right now. Or, really, ever.”

Homage regarded me for a painful moment, then smirked. “Dear, the only thing coming between us for the last several hours has been sweat. But even I had to attend to business, as much as I wanted to slack off. I’m not going to begrudge you doing the same.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“And yes, you can have it.” She caught my eyes with an earnest gaze. “I have a gift for you too. But the Black Opal... think of it as a down payment. I have a quest I want to hire you for.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “Anything.”

She laughed. "You might not say that after I tell you what it is. But... you and your friends, you are planning to head towards Fillydelphia aren't you?" The laughter in her voice died as she spoke that name.

I nodded firmly. "I'm still convinced that something is escalating in the Equestrian Wasteland. Something involving Red Eye and the alicorns. I know they've been around for quite a while," I told her. Long enough for SteelHooves to become known to the monsters as the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, sarcastically at least. Questioning my theory, "The alicorns have been around a long time, right? But, I'm guessing, they've gotten a lot more common?"

Homage considered that. "Hadn't even heard of them ten years ago. Now they're all over the place in Canterlot, and this last year I've noticed groups of them showing up in Manehattan too."

I nodded again. "When I uncover what's going on, DJ Pon3 will be the first to know," I promised.

"And all of Equestria will know soon after," Homage swore. "Although I might get a foreleg up on you..." I suspected the innuendo was intentional. "...if you complete this not-so-little task for me. You remember that bank of blank screens in the E.B.S.?"

I had taken note of them when she first allowed me inside the M.A.S.E.B.S. and let me look around. I told her so.

"Those are the feeds from the Fillydelphia tower. Red Eye has taken control of that tower, or at least the three percent of the tower that I normally have access to, and locked me out of it. If you are going that way, I want you to attach an override to the maneframe in the tower's station. That will allow DJ Pon3 to finally have eyes in that horrible place. Red Eye has operated long enough in the shadows."

I put a hoof down (although stomping a pillow didn't have nearly the effect). "Agreed."



Homage pulled down the picture of Splendid Valley, revealing a wall safe with a door made of thickly armored glass. It opened for her magic with a click.

There were three items inside, two of which she floated out, giving to me. The first was the Black Opal. I gazed at the item full of memories that Watcher wanted so badly.

"I want to give this to you as a gift," Homage said with a soft smile and a warm but insistent voice as she floated out the brightly pink statuette of a very familiar pony. I had never seen Pinkie Pie look so young and so alive. I half-expected the statuette to jump up, animated by the sheer energy in her expression, and start bouncing around the room. This, I realized, was the real Pinkie Pie... *Twilight's* Pinkie Pie. In comparison, the mare I had seen in the memory seemed like a shadow.

"It was a gift given to me from the previous DJ Pon3, who got it from the one before him. I'm told it was given to the original DJ Pon3, Vinyl Scratch, by the Mare of the Ministry of Morale herself." The figurine gave off such an aura of unbridled happiness that I couldn't imagine anypony's morale sagging around her. "It has served me well. And now, I want to give it to you."

I looked at Homage, feeling a startled reluctance. I couldn't! This was an heirloom! It was...

"I know what you've been through. And I know that she went through it too. You... you beat it. She didn't. I want you to have this as a reminder; as something to look at any time you feel the urge to bite down on another Mint-al."

I swallowed hard. And nodded solemnly, understanding the gravity of this gift. I reached out with my magic, wrapping the little Pinkie Pie in a telekinetic sheath, and immediately felt a jolt. Everything became clearer. My body became more alive. It was more than a little like biting into a Mint-al, but it tasted like candy apples and cupcake frosting. ("What did?" part of my mind insisted. It wasn't like I had just put anything in my mouth.) Between the Twilight Statuette and

Pinkie Pie, I felt almost like I was on Mint-Als without them. Only cleaner. Better. More... wholesome.

I turned the statuette around to read the base. It didn't match the others. Of course it wouldn't match the others.

"Awareness! It was under 'E'!"

I felt joyous and heartbroken at the same time. The statuette was a reminder, both of what I had done wrong and of the cost had I not been pulled from the abyss by my friends. A sorrowful acknowledgement of the damage I had done and now I needed to repair. And a messenger telling me that I had the strength to not do it again. And, perhaps most of all, a keepsake from Homage letting me know she understood my weakness with acceptance and forgiveness. "Thank you, Homage. This means... more to me than you can know."

I floated it into my saddlebag (which Homage had apparently floated up here with us while I was too emotionally out of it to notice). Opening the flap to the pouch which held three other statuettes, I took a piece of cloth and tied Pinkie Pie next to Twilight. Now, they could be together again. It was silly, but it just felt right.



As Homage closed the safe, I took notice of the last item mounted inside the safe. It was some sort of magical energy pistol, but not of any make I had ever seen, and with a grip that wouldn't fit in any pony's mouth.

Curiosity sparked, I asked Homage about it.

"Long story," she told me. "One night, Jokeblue and I were poking our hooves around Fetlock, trying to find a Stable we'd heard rumors about, when there was a strange explosion that lit up the clouds above. At first, we thought it was thunder, but then all sorts of debris started raining out of the sky. Chunks of the strangest sky-wagon you

ever laid eyes on. We took cover in a burned-out passenger wagon. When it was over, I found that thing amongst the rubble.” Homage chuckled. “Okay, maybe not that long a story.”

“What is it?”

“Nastiest magical gun the Equestrian Wasteland has ever seen to my knowledge. One shot from that thing will turn whatever you hit into vapor. And not like the magical energy weapons you’ve seen, which do that only once in a blue moon. Every. Single. Time.” Homage actually sounded scared of the gun. “I believe you could kill a dragon with one shot from that thing.” And with those words, so did I.

“Where did it come from?” I wondered aloud. The idea that there were ponies... the pegasi maybe... with weapons that devastating chilled me tail to forehooves.

“Jokeblue figured it was from some sort of flying tank that the pegasi were experimenting with that blew up on them. Me...” Homage swallowed. “I know I’m being foalish, but I can’t help but think it fell from a lot higher than that.”

“Higher?” I had the strange mental image of items falling to Equestria from the moon, emptying from Nightmare Moon’s toy chest.

Homage looked a bit embarrassed, “You’ll laugh.”

I promised I wouldn’t. And resolved not to, no matter how hard it was.

The beautifully sexy grey unicorn took a moment to gather her thoughts. Then, starting cautiously, “I once met a zebra.”

That wasn’t what I expected her to say at all. My ears shot up. I leaned forward.

“They... don’t have the same relationship to the sky that we do. Obviously, since they have no pegasi. But it’s more than that. Before the apocalypse, we ponies had always looked to the sky with a sense of joy and safety. We saw the sun, guided through the sky by Celestia during the day. And the moon, Luna’s charge, keeping an eye on us during the night. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were

our benevolent rulers. And even though most ponies never met them personally, the sun and the moon were symbols of their kind presence everywhere and to everypony in Equestria.”

I felt my body leaning closer, wanting to catch every word of this. I’d never heard Celestia and Luna spoken of this way.

“When they perished in the apocalypse, and the pegasi closed off the sky, stealing the sun and the moon from us, we turned them into deities to keep them always with us. Even those trapped underground in the Stables seemed to do so. A sort of parallel evolution.”

What she was saying was almost blasphemous, but I bucked away the desire to admonish her, leaning precariously closer to hear. Homage had a perspective that I wanted to hear, even if I probably would not have listened to it from anypony else. She made me wonder, ask questions. For instance, would this explain why Calamity did not believe in the Goddesses? Was atheism a pegasus trait? Unlike us, they had never lost the embrace of the sun and the moon.

“The zebras, though, they cringe from the sky,” Homage said. The statement was something I would have expected from a propaganda poster, not a pony who had learned this directly from a zebra. But I knew Homage, and it would not be like her to not speak objective truth as she knew it. “The zebras look up and see the stars staring down at us from a great black emptiness. And the stars, they know, are not benevolent.”

I leaned further, tipped over and fell on my face.

Homage stopped, covering a chuckle with her hoof. When I’d gotten back up, probably looking as sheepish as I felt, she continued. “There is intelligence up there, the zebras believe, from the stars themselves. The stars burn with cold, malicious fire. No number of them could warm the sky at night. They wish ill on our world. And sometimes they will act, not against us directly, but to enable us to harm and ruin ourselves.”

I opened my muzzle, the suggestion that the zebras were a bit batty dying on my lips. Yes, it sounded insane. But didn’t we have legends

that suggested the same? I recalled the story of *The Mare on the Moon*. (The real version, not that “Stallion on the Moon” nonsense.)

The stars will aid in her escape.

“In particular, they tell of four malevolent stars with hearts of cruelty and chaos which yearn to taste our pain and destruction, wrought by our own hooves.” With a grimace, Homage added, “If there’s any truth to the zebra mythology, I’d guess we’ve given them quite the banquet.”

Four stars helping destroy Equestria. Now why did *that* sound familiar.

Homage shrugged off the eerie atmosphere that had settled in the room by her tale. “Anyway, like I said. Foalish. Jokeblue was probably right. Some pegasus experiment that blew up in their faces.”



Cautiously, Homage at my side, I lowered my horn towards the black opal. If I was going to give this to Watcher, I wanted to know what was on it first.

It was only reluctantly that I touched the opal with my magic and let it take Homage and her Athenaeum away from me...



I felt strangely wrong.

We were in a darkened hallway, wide and elaborately decorated, walking towards a brightly lit room with a decorative, curtained partition hiding half of it. There were four ponies walking in front of me, a fifth leading them. The Mares of the Ministries.

The first pony I recognized was Pinkie Pie. While every other pony was walking sedately through the hall, she was bouncing like a fanfilly on her way to her idol’s next performance. The pony was a little younger than I’d seen her before. The candy-cane look was still going strong though.

I felt a pang of deep embarrassment as my gaze fell on the lead pony, the beautiful white unicorn I had... fantasized about. And the pony I was riding just wouldn't stop staring...

Celestia's solar-flaring mareheat!

The creature I was riding *wasn't a pony*. He (and he was most definitely and unbearably a *he!*) was as big as a stallion! I felt... things that were not hooves at the ends of my legs. And wings folded to my back. And a tail!....

"Spike," Fluttershy asked timidly, turning around and looking at me. "Doesn't that hurt?"

My attention was drawn to something tight and metal squeezing my head. The recollector, I assumed. It did not seem to be designed for... whatever I was.

I opened my mouth (which felt all wrong) and answered, "Naw. Barely feel a thing. Besides, Rarity wanted a memory of this."

"She could have worn it herself," Twilight Sparkle muttered under her breath from directly in front of me. I saw my eyes go once again to the white unicorn with the perfect purple mane. She didn't seem to hear it, being engaged in conversation with the pony I knew to be Applejack. The orange pony with the three-apple cutie mark looked a little younger and not as weary as she had at Pinkie Pie's last party.

"Ah sure hope this ain't nothin' t' do with... *that*... thing we never talked about," Applejack was saying with nervous caution.

"Oh no, darling. I gave that project up ages ago," Rarity replied with graceful dictation.

"Oh," the orange pony sighed with clear relief. "Good."

As we approached, we walked across a fancy carpet woven with gemstones. I felt a cold shock as the creature I was riding stepped over it. Twilight Sparkle had stopped just ahead and turned to eye the carpet, as Rarity and Applejack talked. But her attention was drawn by Rarity loudly clearing her throat.

Fluidly, Rarity shifted the subject, speaking up to address all four of the ponies she was leading. "Now this really is just a first design. But I think you'll all be impressed."

"Always thrilled to see one of your designs, Rarity," Twilight Sparkle encouraged.

Rarity smiled with businesslike thankfulness. "And this is just the light suit, not the fully powered version." She turned to Applejack and smiled demurely, "And I do want to make it clear that I'm not trying to step on your hooves here. This armor isn't as strong as your Steel Ranger suits, and doesn't offer quite the protection..."

"Then what's the point?" Applejack interrupted. "Ah don't see the use in creatin' armor that is *less* protective!"

The group had reached the ending of the hallway. There was a large mirror to one side of the room, and the other was filled with sewing machines, bolts of cloth and dress ponies. Designs and schematics covered the walls. At Rarity's motion, they stopped, each turning her attention towards the partition. (Except for my alien ride, who only had eyes for the white unicorn.)

"Well, because there is more to an outfit than just how well it stops bullets, of course!"

Applejack looked ready to disagree strongly, but bit back her comment.

"Okay, Rainbow Dash!" Rarity called out. "They're ready for you!"

Around the curtained partition stepped the shadow out of a nightmare. A blue pegasus pony who was encased in a black, insectoid carapace, with only the front of her muzzle and the undersides of her wings showing. Her tail was hidden within a scorpion-like sheath with a vicious, barbed stinger. The ebony suit of armor was sleek and wicked. Yellow-orange protective goggles with a bug-like compound eye-pattern completed the look. Built into the sides of the suit were antenna-like protrusions; the crystals that tipped those magical-energy weapons shimmered with shifting rainbow light.

The reactions of the other ponies were immediate.

“EEEEEE!”

“Whoa nelly!”

“That looks... demonic.”

“Ooooooh. Dashie, you look *scary!*”

The creature I was riding turned to watch Rarity suddenly take off. “Fluttershy! Come back! It’s only Rainbow Dash!”

I (we?) turned back in time to see Rainbow Dash push up the goggles with one armored hoof. Her eyes narrowed, a smirk running across her muzzle as she lowered her body into a menacing battle stance in front of the mirror. She growled menacingly, the armor making her look positively sinister.

“Oh yeah!” she said. “*This* is cool!”



Reality reasserted itself, leaving me feeling very strange. It was good to be back in my own hooves. I didn’t ever want to be that... thing again.



SteelHooves approached me as I trotted across Tenpony Tower’s monorail station. “You’re headed to meet that... sprite-bot friend of yours, right?”

I nodded, eyeing the armor-concealed warrior.

“Watcher,” he said, surprising me.

“You know Watcher?” I blurted out. Then mentally bucked myself in the head. I had to remember to start actually asking SteelHooves questions.

“I know of Watcher,” SteelHooves intoned. “You don’t live as long as we have without crossing each other’s wake.”

It took me a moment to parse what he had said, but then I nodded. "So... Watcher really has been around that long. Who is Watcher... and what is she, or he... or it... doing?"

"Who? That I couldn't tell you." SteelHooves lifted a foreleg, looking to it. "Watcher lets ponies know less about Watcher than I let them know about me. Not without good reason." He put his hoof down. "As for what: Watcher has a habit of finding ponies with a... who are..."

I wasn't aware I was staring at him until SteelHooves returned the stare. "Watcher finds ponies who are *better ponies*. And sets them on a path to find others, to create teams of friends."

I found myself feeling nervous. I didn't like looking at my adventures from the outside like that. "And then?"

"Well, most of the time, they disappear. Or end up dead."

That. Was not. Comforting.

SteelHooves stayed behind at the station as I trotted out alone on the Celestia Line. I didn't have far to go. The monorail curved around a ruined building, Tenpony Tower disappearing from sight. And there was Watcher, the sprite-bot floating silently. Waiting.

"I have it," I said flatly.

"Thank you, Littlepip. I knew I could trust you. Now, this sprite-bot has a compartment for spare batteries. If you could just..."

"No."

The sprite-bot floated silently for a moment. "Huh?" Watcher sounded perplexed.

"Trust goes two ways, right?" I challenged.

"Well... yes. I relayed your message, just like you asked. Before you got the Black Opal."

I nodded. Made sense, but not what I was after. Not now. I felt a fierce determination set in. "Answer's still no."

“No? You got it, but you’re not going to give it to me?”

“Oh, I’m going to give it to you,” I said forcibly. “In person.”

Watcher fell silent again. This time, I didn’t wait for a response. “You talk a lot about virtues and friendship. Well, friends don’t run away every time a conversation turns personal. You can’t have friends if you hide behind robots and never let anyone see the real you.” I snorted. “Hell, even SteelHooves does better than you do. You want this? I want to meet you.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know if you’re actually my friend or if you’re just playing me too.”

Watcher bobbed silently a moment longer. I wondered just how much the stranger behind the curtain wanted this black opal with the interesting but seemingly insignificant memory. Then, just as I was convinced that Watcher would tell me to go take a jump off the monorail, the toneless mechanical voice said, “Fine.”

I blinked. It was the response I wanted. But...

“You’re right, Littlepip.” I heard a beep from my foreleg. “I’ve uploaded my location into your PipBuck. I’ll see you soon.” There was a burst of static and the sprite-bot floated away on a drum solo.

I lifted my leg to look at my PipBuck. There was an icon on my Equestrian map. Far, far away from Manehattan. In the middle of nowhere. It would take weeks to travel there on hoof.

But if Watcher thought this would dissuade me, or even delay me, then Watcher was wrong.



I had spent one more night in Tenpony Tower with Homage. After which, sadly, it was time to leave. Our first stop was Fetlock.

Calamity spent several hours underneath the Sky Bandit installing the flux regulator and making sure everything was in working order. By the

time he was done, it was getting rapidly dark. "Ah got great news, ponies," he said as he crawled out, looking greasy. "We all got ourselves transportation!"

Velvet Remedy, SteelHooves and I stomped in thunderous applause.

"Now this beauty is powered offa an array of spark batteries, an the last two centuries ain't been kind. So we'll have t' swap 'em out pretty regular t' keep 'er running."

"Wait!" Velvet Remedy said with alarm. "Do you mean this deathtrap's ability to say afloat behind you could cut out at any moment?"

Calamity looked at her almost sympathetically. "Naw. She'll start t' sag first. Become hard t' steer. We'll have plenty o' warnin'."

"And," I assured Velvet Remedy, "if that happens, I think my telekinesis is strong enough by now to keep us going long enough to land safely." There was no way I could lift that much for a prolonged period, not enough to travel anywhere at least; but I was completely confident that I could keep us aloft even if the spark batteries died *and* Calamity fell asleep. For a few minutes.

The others began to gather inside the Sky Bandit. Already, Velvet Remedy was cleaning it with her magic and discussing how to decorate it. Neither of the boys seemed inclined to participate.

I floated out a spoon and can of sweet potatoes, opening it. I was hungry again, and I intended to eat lunch as I planned the next three moves. With the *Sky Bandit*, we could be on Watcher's doorstep in less than two days.

"uh, Littlepip?" Calamity called out. "Are ya gonna hang out there in the rain?"

I paused, a spoon of sweet potatoes lifted halfway to my mouth. "What? It's not..."

>>**BOOOM!!**<<

Thunder cracked directly overhead and water came down as if somepony had turned on a giant faucet directly above me. I was soaked in an instant, my hair sagging over my face. The can filled with water, floating chunks of sweet potato out onto the ground.

Leave it to a pegasus pony to know.

Tossing aside the can (now full of mostly water), I galloped into the shelter of the passenger wagon. Calamity and Velvet Remedy took shelter behind SteelHooves as I shook hard, flinging water everywhere.

There was a beautiful, piercing cry. And the balefire phoenix swooped in out of the rain through a shattered window. It landed on the seat next to Velvet Remedy whose eyes went wide. She let out a squeal of delight.



“You’ve named her Pyrelight?” SteelHooves asked, echoing my own thoughts as Velvet Remedy fed the bird before curling up under her blanket. We’d been traveling through the air for a day now, ever since the cloudburst had ended. The balefire phoenix had remained with us, or more precisely with Velvet Remedy.

I personally found the name a little morbid. It made me wonder about my friend.

We took turns sleeping and watching, passing around my binoculars. So far, nothing had shot at us. By now, we had a good idea where we were headed. It was hard to miss the giant mountain jutting up over Equestria like one of those spire towers.

Once SteelHooves was certain Velvet Remedy was deep asleep, he stepped over to me and whispered in my ear, “You should persuade her to spend less time in that memory orb.”

I looked at Velvet Remedy. In the last sixteen hours, she’d disappeared into the Fluttershy memory twice. It was like she had an addiction of her own.

"That's not a good memory," SteelHooves rumbled, surprising me. I looked to him, wondering how a non-unicorn could know what the memory was. As if reading my thoughts, he answered bemusedly, "I asked her."

Oh. I felt like facehoofing. "What's wrong with that memory?"

"Fluttershy wasn't like the others. Rainbow Dash wanted to *win* the war. Applejack just wanted to protect other ponies. Especially after Big Macintosh died. Twilight Sparkle wanted to please the Princesses, especially Celestia," SteelHooves intoned. "But Fluttershy just wanted the war to end. That memory is the moment she put her whole Ministry to that purpose of finding a way to end the conflict. And she did."

I felt a shudder.

"In a world where not everyone is sane, it is the height of insanity to believe you could create a weapon so devastating, so horrible, that no one would dare use it."

Oh no.

I looked at Velvet Remedy as she slept. The same urge that made me discard the memory orb from Horseshoe Tower returned, grown an order of magnitude. She loved Fluttershy. Modeled herself after the sweet, shy yellow pegasus pony. She couldn't ever learn this.

"Wait," I said slowly, "You said no *one*?" His odd word choice reminded me of my first conversation with Watcher.

SteelHooves answered dreadfully, "Perhaps the only thing more insane than believing such a weapon would bring peace is creating such a weapon... and then giving it to both sides."

SteelHooves turned to me behind his helmet's visor. "That memory: that is the beginning of the end of the world. Ultimately, *Fluttershy killed us all.*"



We were circling the mountain, pushing upwards. It was night, and Calamity was taking the ascent slow as I guided him with my PipBuck's map.

"All right," he called back. "Ah was 'fraid of this. Looks like your Watcher friend lives high enough up this peak t' be above the cloud level. We could be okay, but... Well, t'ain't safe traveling above the clouds. Least nowhere there's civilization above."

Everypony was awake. (As was Pyrelight.) We all nodded, readying ourselves. I had no idea what to expect when we pushed through the cloud cover, but I doubted it would be a cheerful welcoming party with smiles and muffins.

Calamity flapped his wings, carrying us upward into the cloud curtain. It was like being plunged into a slightly damp fog. All I could see of the rust-colored pegasus pulling us through the sky was a hint of his orange tail.

A moment later, the Sky Bandit burst up through the cloud curtain and the night sky expanded infinitely around us filled with (evil?) stars. A beautiful full moon hung in the sky behind the mountain peak, silhouetting it like a vertical rip in the universe.

Velvet Remedy let out an awe-filled, "Ooooooooooooooooooh!" Pyrelight gave a musical cry.

The jaws of vertigo clamped down around me. My legs went weak, my knees giving out. Irrational panic told me that I would somehow be sucked out one of the windows and fall endlessly up through space. Maybe one of the stars would get me.

I clutched the side of the passenger wagon, looking down at the clouds. That was much better and just as beautiful. The clouds were laced with silver from the moonlight, glowing with a gentle, calming light.

My eyes ("It was under 'E'!") spotted a glint of metal on one of the cliffs. I asked Calamity to pull us closer.

I had expected it was Watcher, or at least another sprite-bot. But instead it was an audio recorder. I floated it into the *Sky Bandit*.

"This had better not be from Watcher..." I said, starting to feel a touch pissed.

"Ah don't think so," Calamity said from in front of the wagon. I slipped the audio recorder away, looking out to spy what he saw. I kicked on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

Just in time, too. According to my PipBuck, I had found "Dragon Cave."



"I think maybe your friend sent us up here to get eaten," Velvet Remedy said aloud, staring up at the huge, dark opening. The *Sky Bandit* lay parked on the cliff behind us. SteelHooves was helping Calamity out of the pulling harness.

"The PipBuck's data is two hundred years old," I assured her nervously. "So it was a Dragon Cave two hundred years ago. Anypony could live in there now." Well, anypony with wings, anyway.

A freed Calamity trotted up to join us. "Well, y'all plan on waitin' outside 'till the sun comes up?" Then, just in case we were, "Ah don't recommend it."

Velvet Remedy shook her head. "Of course not! Littlepip, you go first."

Oh thanks a lot! I shot her a look.

"Well, Watcher is *your* friend."

That remained to be seen. I took a step forward.

There was a heavy thud from inside. Something moved in the darkness, coming closer. Something *big*!

“Ursa Majors don’t grow wings, do they?” Velvet Remedy asked nervously, making me want to buck her. Hard. I was frightened enough already.

A dragon poked its head out of the cave! A huge, gigantic, *fully adult* dragon who could easily eat two ponies in one bite, even if one of them was SteelHooves. Three if two of them were Homage and myself.

“Hello, Littlepip. I’m Spike!” the dragon said in a voice that was neither as terrifying nor booming as I had expected.

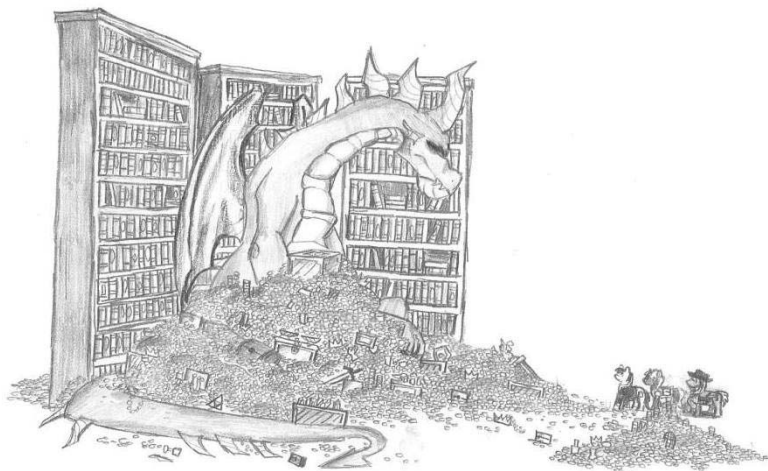
“And don’t worry. I’m not going to eat you.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Pathfinder Travel time to remote locations in the Equestrian Wasteland is reduced by 25%. The drain on the *Sky Bandit’s* spark batteries is likewise reduced.

Quest Perk added: Pony Sutra You are experienced in the art of giving and receiving physical pleasure. You are more likely to have sexual encounters with specific characters.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE HEART OF TWILIGHT SPARKLE

“Have you ever watched the moon rise over the Wasteland? I wish I could have given you something as wonderful as that.”

Dragon!

Really big, gigantic, enormous purple dragon with green spines and with claws and spikes and very, very sharp teeth and a huge mouth that had just promised not to eat us.

Well, that was a start.

I could hear the voices of my companions around me, but I couldn't turn my head. My gaze remained locked on the *dragon* staring down at us. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe.

“Calamity,” Velvet Remedy whispered urgently. “Don't shoot it!”

“Ah weren't plannin' to,” Calamity hissed back. “Girl, ya gotta let that go.”

Pyrelight cried out and flew away, wings flapping with the sound of a crackling fireplace.

"Interesting," mused a deep rumble from SteelHooves' armor.

"Ah'd say he's a damn sight more'n interestin'!"

"He said he was Spike," SteelHooves said curiously. "He *didn't* say he was Watcher."

The dragon's gaze locked on me. He raised a very sharp claw the length of my whole body.

Addressing me, Spike-the-fully-grown-dragon asked, "They do know I can hear them, right?"



"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, Calamity... please don't be afraid." Spike smiled, showing way too many sharp teeth. Dragons shouldn't smile when they're trying to not be intimidating. "You're welcome in my house. On one condition."

Watcher was setting conditions; that would have irked me, but this was his home. And Watcher was a dragon. Dragons got to set whatever conditions they wanted.

I was fully expecting something along the lines of *Don't steal, hoof through or touch my treasure*. I was not prepared for the dragon to point at SteelHooves with one lethal claw and say, "*That* stays outside."

Watcher had a problem with ghouls? That did irk me. Perhaps not quite so much as it would have after meeting Ditzzy Doo and before learning about Rottingtail, but it still bothered me. "He's with us," I insisted, putting my hoof down.

"I breathe fire," Spike countered, winning the argument.

I turned to SteelHooves. "You okay with this?" After everything, part of me was ready to turn my back on Watcher and just walk away if SteelHooves said no.

"I'll be fine," SteelHooves answered. I felt unexpectedly relieved. "Besides, I won't be alone." SteelHooves' armor-sheathed tail jabbed towards the *Sky Bandit*. Pyrelight had taken shelter inside and was furtively peeking her head through one of the windows. Apparently, flying into the home of Equestria's largest predator was a bit much to ask of our new, feathered companion.

I nodded to SteelHooves then turned back to the dragon. "Okay."

Velvet Remedy was more gracious and diplomatic, giving Spike a courteous bow. "Thank you, mighty Spike, for allowing us into your house!" she barely paused before choosing to use the word he had.

Do dragons blush? Spike seemed to. He glanced back into the darkness behind him. "Well, it's really more of a cave. But I've fixed it up enough that it feels like a house."

"I'm sure you did splendidly," Velvet Remedy flattered.

Spike turned -- we all ducked as his massive tail swung around -- and led us into the cave. We followed, all except Pyrelight and SteelHooves. A pony in my head stomped insistently, wanting to know why I had just been required to leave a friend outside.



A dragon? Watcher was... a dragon?

The awe and I'm-about-to-get-eaten dread was washing away, and I was surprised to find that what tip-hoofed in to replace it was anger.

"It's delightful!" proclaimed Velvet Remedy. "I didn't know a dragon's cave could be so... homey." She turned around, taking in the scattered piles of gemstones surrounding an immense circular bed sunken into the floor. "And there are so many books. You must be a collector." The walls were lined with bookshelves, many of which were full. The cave continued on into the darkness through a massive fissure in the back wall.

"They're Twilight's," Spike said almost reflexively. Then, with a touch of sadness, he corrected himself. "Were Twilight's."

"Twilight Sparkle?" I asked, seeking to confirm my suspicions. I was already sure of the answer even before the dragon nodded. I was thinking of the audio message Homage had played for me, the one Rarity had left Twilight Sparkle. Twilight Sparkle had *not* gone to Pinkie Pie when she ran out of room for her books. She had started storing them here.

A single terminal sat on a pedestal near the bed, an only slightly fancier model than that found everywhere in the wasteland; a cable snaked deeper into the cave from the machine's back. I had been expecting something much more like Homage's setup in the M.A.S.E.B.S.

The little pony in my head was stomping more insistently. Finally, feeling just a touch cross, I bluntly asked, "Why did I tell SteelHooves to stay outside?"

"Uh... you didn't. I did," Spike said, as if I needed to be reminded of the flow of events. "The day a Steel Ranger steps hoof into my house is the day I eat canned food!" The ominous growl in his voice made it very clear what "can" he was talking about.

Okay, Spike didn't have a problem with ghouls. He had a problem with Steel Rangers. Or was it with the Ministry of Technology in general? From someone who spent his days jumping around sprite-bots, that would be a surprising attitude.

Velvet Remedy was still looking around, expressing admiration that the dragon was just soaking up. I suspected it had been a very long time since somepony had complimented him on anything, even something as simple as how well he kept the books dusted. Leave it to Velvet Remedy to know just what to say.

Particularly since I was feeling much less diplomatic. I bit my lip; I was seething just under the surface, and I couldn't put my hoof on why. I wondered if my emotional state was some sort of delayed PTM withdrawal. Or if I was just more tired than I realized. I'd spent most of the last four weeks, ever since leaving Stable Two, in a state of physical or mental exhaustion.

But Homage had pulled me through a miraculous (and multi-orgasmic) recovery. I should be in far more control than I was suddenly feeling. I looked away from Spike, staring at his huge bed. It did look comfortable. Plush with pillows and blankets, I'd even say it looked heavenly. I blushed hotly and shivered from something not related to cold as my brain conjured up mental images of what I would do with Homage (*to* Homage) on a bed like that. I looked away, clearing my throat.

Spike took the sound as a call for attention. "Oh, right. The Black Opal." He stretched out a purple paw, its expanse bigger than my whole body. "If you would, please?"

Courier pony at your service, I thought bitterly as I floated out the Black Opal and set it into his palm. "Why did you want this so badly?" I asked. He was a dragon. He was no more able to view the memory than an earth pony could. And I doubted that anypony had ever made a recollector in his (current) size.

"Because," he answered simply, "It was the last time Equestria's greatest mares, and my closest friends, were together." With a sadly nostalgic tone, he added, "All of us. In the same place, at the same time. And happy."



Twilight Sparkle. Rarity. Pinkie Pie. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy.

They were, in Spike's own words, the greatest heroines of Equestria. The mares who epitomized the six most important virtues of ponykind. The mares whose friendship had the power to change the world.

"How did it go so wrong?"

It was Velvet Remedy who asked, but I think we all needed to know. Spike was slow to answer, and much of what he told us I had already expected.

“Those ponies, my dearest friends, were not without their problems. They had their failings, even when they were young. But their virtues let them stand up to any hardship, and their friendship gave them a strength that they never had as individuals.” Spike smiled nostalgically. But then the smile faded. “Even the greatest people have their flaws. And when put under pressure or in the right circumstances, those flaws can become cracks. They can break you.”

“And with the Ministries, they weren’t together anymore. And they were under pressure all the time...” Spike stopped. And then fiercely asserted, “Not that everything that went wrong can be laid at their hooves! Not even most of it!”

We all nodded, listening intently.

“First there was the war. Equestria had been at war for over a decade before Luna created the Ministries. War changes everything!” Spike informed us passionately. “Before that, Equestria had known peace for over a thousand years. We didn’t know war. We didn’t understand it. Maybe, if we’d had a few in the past, we wouldn’t have made all the mistakes all at once.”

The dragon’s tail thumped, making gems and books and ponies jump.

“And then there were the Ministries themselves. The very epitome of good ideas and noble intentions gone wrong. And not by the fault of the mares who ‘ran’ them.”

Velvet Remedy caught an inflection in Spike’s words that I did not. “What do you mean? The Mares of the Ministries didn’t actually run the Ministries?”

“Well, yes. And no.” Spike pinched the bridge of his nose between two claws, wincing a bit. “How can I put this?”

We waited as the dragon gathered his thoughts.

“Of the six of them, only two even tried to run their Ministries. Those were Twilight Sparkle and Rarity. The others pretty much just threw suggestions at their Ministries and hoped for the best.” Spike fought

for words before finding an analogy he felt was suitable. (I found it rather an odd choice, myself).

"Think of the Ministries as dressmakers. They have their own ideas of how to make a good dress, but they are beholden to the sporadic demands of their clients -- in this case, my friends, the Mares who have been put in charge of them -- even when those clients don't have the first clue about the art of dressmaking. No matter how good the suggestions may seem, no matter how brilliantly skilled the dressmakers may be, they can still end up with a nightmare design."

Calamity broke in, "Ayep. 'Specially if what yer talkin' 'bout is more like a committee o' dressmakers, all competin' fer their vision." Spike agreed.

"Democracies tend t' make a mess outta everything," Calamity said with clear bitterness. "Only time they c'n act as one is when they're feelin' threatened."

I looked at my rust-coated companion, wondering: where that had come from? Oh... of course. Suddenly, I was very happy I didn't know more about pegasi politics.



"Ah don't get it," Calamity commented. "Why ya hidin' in here? Ain't like there's much a dragon needs t' hide from." He cocked his head thoughtfully, "Ah mean, a really ticked-off Ursa Major, maybe."

And that's when I knew why I was mad. His words were like an earthquake, opening a fissure of reason to the anger simmering just beneath the surface. My response was natural: I erupted.

"All this time, you've been a dragon! A *DRAGON*! All. This. Time!

Spike looked at me, startled.

"uh, Littlepip," Calamity cautioned. "Please don't upset the really big dragon."

I stomped, fuming now. "Do you have any idea how much good you could have done? How many lives you could have saved?" I found myself advancing on the dragon in my fury. I would have facehoofed at the preposterousness of my own actions had I not been blinded by righteous anger. Spike's backing away from me only heightened the absurdity of it.

"Don't tell me you don't care," I spat. "*I know* you care! You've been *watching*. Why aren't you out there *doing something!*' The Equestrian Wasteland needs someone like you!"

Spike looked abashed, but insisted, "I have my reasons."

"Reasons?!" I attacked, "Afraid of getting your own claws bloody? Hell, the Ponyville Raiders couldn't have even scratched your scales! But no, you'd rather send a little mare fresh out of a Stable with virtually no combat experience into a pit of raiders where she's more likely to get killed than to save anypony." I was huffing. My mane and tail were in disarray. Part of me seriously wanted to charge Watcher. Maybe with all my telekinesis behind it, my horn could give him a jab he might actually feel.

"Littlepip..."

"What reasons? What could possibly be more important!?"

I was screaming at the dragon. All the times I had put my own life at risk to help others, and the person who had set me on that path was a *nigh-invulnerable dragon* yet couldn't be bothered to leave the house? "What, do you need to polish your gems? Count them? Maybe take a nap?"

Spike flinched. Seeing that was like dumping fuel on the fire. I opened my mouth and let out a barrage I didn't know I had in me.

"Enough!" boomed Spike, finally sounding like a dragon. I cringed, suddenly remembering that I was small and probably tasty. The single word slammed me into silence.

The dragon turned away from me, looking to my friends. "Do you trust Littlepip?"

“Ayep!” said Calamity without hesitation.

“Yes, I do,” chimed in Velvet Remedy. I felt a pang, knowing that I might have hesitated had our places been reversed. While I forgave her, I still felt the pain of her betrayal, no matter how well-intentioned and beneficial it had been.

“All right. Then I will tell Littlepip my reasons. But only Littlepip. And only on the promise that she never tell anyone else. Not even you.”

“Why?” Velvet Remedy asked politely. I would have demanded an answer.

Spike scowled deeply. “You’ve seen memory orbs. You know that there are ponies who can rip a thought from you with their magics. And the so-called Goddess who commands the alicorns is telepathic. And through her, so are they.”

I was struck with a new image of the alicorns as terminals linked to a maneframe. Sending and receiving messages from and through it. This is how they knew when and how one of their own had died -- their Goddess observed their death through the alicorn’s mind and then sent the knowledge on to all the rest.

“The fewer who know, the smaller the risk that someone might rip that knowledge from you and use it against...” He paused before concluding with, “me.”

I frowned. If Watcher’s reason for being Watcher was that dire, then Spike was taking a massive risk just telling me. My outburst alone couldn’t be cause enough to break two hundred years of silence.

Or was it an opportunity? Again, I got the impression that the dragon was desperately lonely in his self-imposed exile.

On the other hoof, Spike could just be full of horseapples. “All right,” I stated firmly. “I’ll agree to that condition... but only if your reason is good!”

Spike contemplated that for just a moment before seeming to accept it. He stared to Calamity and Velvet Remedy. "And will Littlepip's word that my reason is 'good' be enough for you two, without ever hearing what it is?"

"Yeah," Calamity said, frowning. "Ah trust Littlepip's judgment. If she says ya got good cause t' leave the rest o' the folk out their on their own, that's good 'nuff fer me."

Velvet Remedy nodded. "Of course."

"Then follow me, Littlepip. I have something to show you." The huge purple dragon turned and lumbered further into the cave, passing through the fissure in the wall.

I gave Calamity and Velvet Remedy one last look, and then trotted after him, nearly needing to gallop to keep up.



"What am I looking at?" I asked for the second time in my life.

We had traveled into the center of the mountain peak -- I had soon realized we were following the cable from Spike's terminal -- and now I stood in a vast chamber, large enough for the dragon to move around easily.

Along the walls were maneframes, half a dozen of them, with gemstones that pulsed with magical energy. They all seemed to be nearly dormant save for the closest one, which beeped busily. In the center of the room, like a gigantic stalagmite of magic and steel, rose the tapering column of a super-maneframe that made DJ Pon3's systems look downright quaint. Massive, insulated wires ran up the walls from the tops of the maneframes, then swooped across the chamber to attach around the column at a point well above Spike's head.

The chamber was a chimney. Staring upwards, I could see far above us a rough circle of night's sky, twinkling with stars. The super-maneframe was pointed towards that hole like a colossal magical wand.

"A Crusader Maneframe," Spike answered.

The ultimate arcano-technological maneframe. So powerful it could think for itself. Learn. It could even hold the imprint of a pony's mind. Only three had ever been built, I remembered. One was installed in Stable Twenty-Nine. One went to the Ministry of Awesome. And one... this one... came here.

A platform radiated out from the base of the Crusader like a six-pointed star, each point ending in a dais. Upon each dais rested a fine pillow upon which sat a single piece of jewelry. The one closest to me was a beautiful tiara. The other that I could see clearly was a necklace.

"Are you..." I looked at Spike, suddenly questioning my assumptions. "Is *this* Watcher?"

Spike chuckled. "No. I'm Watcher. This is a Crusader Maneframe. A very special one."

"What does it do?" I asked, my curiosity beating down my anger. "Except let you hack sprite-bots and spy on ponies." Something this incredible couldn't be here for a purpose so... pedestrian.

"Right now, nothing," Spike told me. I felt the little pony in my head cry out in disappointment. "It's waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for who."

I looked at Spike blankly.

Spike seemed to bulwark himself. I sensed the plunge he was about to take frightened him. "This is Twilight Sparkle's greatest and most important project. She poured her heart into this. In the end, it was more important to her than anything else..."

Spike trailed off, looking to me as if pleading that I could grasp how meaningful his words were. I nodded, waiting for him to continue. I was reserving judgment, but already felt sure that Spike's "reasons" were, if not good enough for myself or other ponies, truly of vital importance to him.

"She commissioned this Crusader, and worked on it herself in every private moment she had. Creating a maneframe which could cast a very special spell..."

I blinked, jaw dropping. "What? All this..." I waved a hoof, "Just to cast a spell?"

Spike glared at me and I shut up. "Not just a spell. A megaspell. One more powerful and more complicated than any other megaspell ever conceived. Twilight Sparkle wouldn't have been able to cast it -- the most powerful magical pony born in a thousand years -- and she created it. *Gardens of Equestria* was beyond what even Celestia or Luna could hope to cast."

"Gardens of Equestria?"

"Yes," Spike answered. "A single spell, powered by the Elements of Harmony, calculated and cast by a magically augmented Crusader Maneframe. A single spell that would affect the entirety of Equestria, cleansing it of radiation and taint, restoring it to the beautiful paradise it once was before the other megaspells twisted and poisoned it."

Oh. My. Goddesses.

I stared, eyes wide, unbelieving even though I could tell it was true. One spell. One single spell that could fix... well, not everything, but it would mend the soul of our mortally wounded land.

"Then why..." I asked slowly, an ache building up inside me. A beautiful, restored Equestria... "Why hasn't it been cast?"

Spike spoke with almost infinite sadness. "Because the ponies who can use the Elements of Harmony are dead."



I moved around the Crusader, looking at each Element of Harmony in turn. I stopped when I reached the necklace with a balloon-shaped gemstone.

I went to the get-together at Spike's place and brought It just like you asked. All of my friends were there but you...

"Twilight Sparkle entrusted you with the Element of Magic, didn't she?"

"She entrusted me with all of this," Spike answered. "I can't leave. If a band of raiders should make their way into this place while I'm gone... or worse, a troop of Steel Rangers..."

He didn't need to say anything more.

"I can't take the risk that someone might damage or destroy this," Spike said anyway. "I have to stay here. Keep guard. Until I can find the right ponies."

I sat down next to the Laughter Dais, my eyes wet. The raw emotions stirred by what I was seeing and hearing were too much.

"For nearly two hundred years," Spike admitted morosely, "I have been searching out ponies who seemed like they were virtuous. Helping them. Setting them on a path to find more like themselves. All in the hopes of one day finding the right six ponies. Magic. Kindness. Laughter. Generosity. Honesty. And... loyalty."

My heart broke for the dragon. "All that time?"

He gave a bark of hurting laughter. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is just for a pony to find five friends in the blasted horror of the wasteland." He looked down, his eyes taking me in. "Well, actually, you do."

"Does it have to be six?" I asked.

"In all of Equestria's history, there has only been one pony who has ever been able to wield more than one. (Trust me, I have a lot of books on the subject.) And that was Celestia. She used the power of the Elements of Harmony to banish the monster her sister had turned into. Only with the Elements can magic that powerful be cast. And only Celestia had the ability to use them all."

"Then.... Why didn't she?" A thought struck me. "For that matter, why didn't she just send all the damn zebras to the moon?"

"Because she's dead too," Spike informed me bluntly. "And even when she wasn't, she couldn't use them anymore. They were no longer *hers* to use."

I stared up at the nearest dais. The tiara, Spike had informed me earlier, was the Element of Magic. I found myself reminded just how pathetically un-magical I was. For all the raw power I had learned to tap, I was truly a one-trick pony.

A dark realization washed over me.

"It... it's not us, is it?" I looked around at the daises and then back to Spike. "We're not the right group of friends either. We can't bring Equestria back." I felt my heart tearing. "You're still looking."

Spike nodded sorrowfully. "No. You're not." He snorted laughter again. "Don't feel bad about it though. You're an amazing pony, and you have amazing friends. I have no doubt that the group of you will do a lot of good for the Equestrian Wasteland. It's just not your destiny to heal it."

A beautiful, green, healthy Equestria... full of life... just a spell away. And I was... insufficient. I'd never felt more worthless.

"Hey," Spike scolded, reading my expression. "It's not your fault. Hell, imagine how hard it is to find a pony with the virtue of laughter in the Equestrian Wasteland."

I thought of Ditzzy Doo, and felt a spark of hope. *We* might be the wrong ponies. But maybe I could start Spike on the right path to finding the ones who are. "I think I know who you're looking for."



I swore that I would never speak a word of what Spike had shown me. I almost wished he hadn't. The consequences of an enemy learning of what Spike was protecting in this place was no less than the

doom of Equestria's greatest hope. It was a heavy secret even for a dragon. And I was a very small pony.

On our way back to the others, I noticed something that Spike had unintentionally blocked my view of before. Set high into the wall was a glass case. In the case were six statuettes. I knew them well. I already had four of my own.

I couldn't see them properly, nor could I read their inscriptions, without floating myself up to them. I felt that would be inappropriate.

"What happened to them?" I asked suddenly. Spike stopped, looking back at me, then trailing my gaze up to the display case.

"I mean, I know what happened to Pinkie Pie. But what happened to the rest of them?"

Spike's jaw clenched frighteningly. "I don't know."

"You... don't know? I mean, you were there, right?"

"I. Don't. Know." He repeated, sounding threatening.

I took a step back, swallowing hard, suspecting that I had crossed a line, and probably destroyed any bonding that had begun in the chamber behind us. I stared at the floor. "Oh.... Of course... you were *here*."

The dragon's voice boomed with anger and self-incrimination and regret: **"I was *asleep*!"**

Yet again, I found myself staring at the dragon. The huge, purple, powerful dragon who had somehow slept through the apocalypse.

"I just needed to take a nap! I figured that if anything important happened, someone would wake me up" Spike cried, his voice brimming with a self-loathing that made my own self-hatreds seem petty and small. **"I should have been there! I should have been with her! She was my closest friend! She shouldn't have died alone! But instead, I was *asleep*!"**

"I'm... I'm so sorry," I said, my voice trembling. I put a hoof on his scales in a feeble attempt to comfort him. He was too big to hug.

Spike just stood there, unmoving, lost in an ocean of his own regrets. He didn't cry. I suspect that the tears this pain could wring from him had all been shed over a century ago. So I cried for him.

I understood it. This mountain was in the middle of nowhere. Days' travel from any hint of civilization. It would have been nearly impossible for even the sounds of the megaspells to reach this far, easily mistakable as thunder. The flashes of light might have pierced the cave... but after the very first hit, the pegasus ponies had closed up the sky.

When Spike had gone to sleep, all his friends were still alive. Equestria was struggling through the darkest part of its history, but there was hope it could pull through. When he woke up, Equestria was gone. His friends were dead. The sky was cloud-locked and the land below was nothing but blighted, poisonous wastes.

I wondered how he had ever been able to sleep again.



"I just want you to remember," Spike told me as we approached the main room of his 'house', "That *Gardens of Equestria* was the real gift that Twilight Sparkle gave to all of us."

His voice took on a slightly hard edge. "I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi. But this... what you saw back there... that is the *true* heart of Twilight Sparkle."

"I won't forget," I promised.

"And remember, this is your secret now. And my little breakdown back there? That's a secret too. You breathe one word of that, and I'll eat you," Spike said dourly. Then cracked a smirk, "Or, for that matter, if you make any jokes about a grown guy playing with dolls."

Calamity and Velvet Remedy looked up at us as we returned. From Velvet's expression, she could tell I had been crying. "It's a good reason," I said simply.

They both nodded, clearly willing to accept it.

An awkward silence fell over the room.

Calamity glanced nervously towards the entrance. Somewhere out there were the other pegasi, a whole civilization that had once been his home. To his family and friends, he was now a Dashite. A traitor. Was he thinking about them? Missing them? Or was he worried about what his own kind would do, not to himself but to his friends, should they catch us up here?

Velvet Remedy fidgeted with her saddleboxes -- medical kits that had seen far too much use patching up wounds inflicted by violence. The singer and aspiring medical pony, a pacifist by nature to whom the thought of harming another pony was abhorrent, now wore three weapons, one of them a combat shotgun. She'd stopped speaking to us like we were capable of horrible things because now she knew just what we were capable of. Instead, she retreated into a fantasy world that was more of a minefield than she could ever know.

Spike...

I could almost feel the pain everyone was hiding.

"Tell us about them," I said, breaking the silence. Everyone turned to me.

"Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and the others. You knew them, Spike. Tell us about what they were like when they were younger." When they were happy. Tell us of the good times, Spike. Everyone here needs to hear that. Including, if not especially, you.



"Wait, wait, wait..." I gasped. "She got them to let her go by *whining*?"

Calamity was laughing, "And give up all them jewels t' boot?"

Spike nodded, a big smile on the dragon's face.

"I'll have to remember that," Velvet Remedy said with dangerous silkiness.

"Great, Spike," Calamity muttered. "Ya doomed us all."

I clopped my hooves on the cave floor in applause. "Tell us another one!"

This was good. Calamity had cheered up immeasurably at the tale of how about Rainbow Dash had stood up against her own for the buffalo. Velvet Remedy had virtually fan-gasmed over Fluttershy's caring for a sick phoenix. And I could tell that talking about all of them, especially Twilight Sparkle, was doing Spike a world of good.

I opened my saddlebags, pulling out Sparkle-Colas for each of us. One of the bottles had wedged itself against the audio recorder I had found on the cliffside, forcing me to shake it loose. Part of me felt bad that SteelHooves couldn't be in here with us sharing these memories. But I understood all too much why Spike didn't want a knight of the Ministry of Technology poking around his lair. Instead, I tried to memorize the stories so that we could share them with him.

"Okay, here's another one. This is the story about Twilight Sparkle's first Winter Wrap-Up."

"What's a Winter Wrap-Up?" Calamity asked, opening the Sparkle-Cola I had passed to him. Carrot-flavored liquid erupted in his face. He shot me a look.

"Oh, come on," I chortled. "I owed you that for the Ministry of Awesome!"

He glowered, then chuckled. Velvet Remedy floated him a cloth to wipe his face.

Spike watched us with amusement, waiting for Calamity to dry himself before answering. "Well, that's when the ponies of Ponyville would clean up the winter so that spring could start properly." As he looked at us, I could see it dawning on him that none of us had the slightest clue what he was talking about. Two of us were from Stables and had never experienced a winter. Calamity had been an outcast long enough to

have been through a few, but only wild winters that wrapped themselves up on their own. The pegasi had long stopped aiding the passing of the seasons.

“Well, normally in Equestria, one season would be aided to finish neat-and-tidy by magic. But Ponyville was founded by earth ponies, and it was tradition to help wrap up winter the earth pony way. Without magic.”

“But they had unicorns and pegasi living their too,” Velvet Remedy questioned. “So why didn’t they use magic?”

Spike nodded. “I thought it was silly the first time too. First half-dozen times, actually. Wasn’t until I visited Fillydelphia that I understood.”

“Understood what?” I asked.

“Well, it’s more difficult for earth ponies,” Spike explained. “They don’t have magic. They don’t have wings. A lot of the time, they have to work three times as hard to get half as much done. But they will, without a complaint. You won’t find ponies as proud or stubborn as earth ponies.”

I took Spike’s words as the generality they were, although I wondered how they might apply to our friend clad in steel.

“Of course, earth ponies are exceptionally innovative. Wait until I tell you the story of when Pinkie Pie chased down Rainbow Dash and a griffin with a crazy flying machine! They’re always looking for a way to do more work more easily. That’s why earth ponies have always been the ones to push technological progress. Equestria probably wouldn’t have ever come up with the wheel if it wasn’t for earth ponies.”

“Ah believe it,” Calamity agreed. “Well, the part ‘bout the wheel. Ah don’t believe no earth pony coulda kept pace with Rainbow Dash.”

I smiled at that.

Spike returned to his story. “It all started with Twilight waking me up waaaay too early **and I told you that you are not welcome in here!**”

I turned, knowing that SteelHooves must have walked into the cave. Maybe he overheard our voices and wanted to say something about earth ponies. That would certainly fit the proud and stubborn label.

SteelHooves was backing into the cave.

Not good.

“Sorry to intrude,” the Steel Ranger said. “But you have more company. Fry me if you must, but you might want to deal with them first.”

Calamity’s voice was nearly a growl as he said: “Them?”

Four pegasus ponies completely entombed in nightmarish black Pegasus Enclave armor flew into the room, landing in front of us.

Spike reacted immediately. The green-spined purple dragon drew himself up to his full height, snorting flame and spreading his wings wide. **“YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!”**

They stood their ground, although two of them backed up a pony’s length.

“Seems you have some other guests,” the lead Enclave pegasus said casually.

“They are here at my invitation. You. Are. Not!”

The lead pegasus spread his forehooves in a disarming gesture. “We’re just here to make sure they find their way safely back beneath the clouds,” he said amiably.

“Ah think we c’n find our way ourselves.” Calamity had lowered into a fighting stance. He kicked a handle below the bite-piece of his battle saddle -- a lever that had not been there before Tenpony Tower; I heard a clicking inside the battle saddle as the ammo type changed. I was certain he had just swapped in armor-piercing rounds.

“Don’t shoot them,” Velvet Remedy hissed to Calamity. “Let us at least try diplomacy first.”

"Well lookie who it is!" one of the female Enclave pegasi called out with a whistle. "We got ourselves a Dashite!"

"Not just any Dashite," one of the other black-clad males spoke up. "That's Deadshot Calamity."

"Horseapples!" I heard Calamity mutter under his breath.

The lead pegasus looked between my friend and the pegasus who had identified him. "You sure?"

"Oh yeah. Winner of the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running? You don't forget the pony who beat you."

"Gutshot?" Calamity whispered, eyes going wide.

The leader's compound visor turned towards Calamity, locking him in its glowing, fire-colored glare. "Well I'll be. Decorated military officer to murderous traitor..." The gems on his battle saddle's antenna-like weapons began to glow a fierce yellow-orange that matched his visor. "Sorry, dragon, but this changes things."

Spike didn't seem to think so. **"Go. While I still let you."** The dragon was growing impatient.

"You seem to forget who is in charge up here, dragon," the leader said, still speaking gently. "Now we'll be going, as a gesture of goodwill. But we'll be taking that criminal there into custody." He pointed a hoof at Calamity.

"You seem to forget who is tasty and good with ketchup."

"Hey now..." The mare in sinister black magically-powered armor spoke up again, "Look, dragon... sir. The reward for this one's head is worth a pretty nice pile o' gems. Far tastier than any pony. Tell you what: let us take him, the reward is yours."

Spike paused. Blinked. "Gems?"

Oh no... he wouldn't. Not after everything he just told us about friends, especially his friends...

The pegasus nodded. "A lot of gems!"

“A lot of gems?”

“Yep!”

Spike cocked his head, as if listening to a voice we couldn't hear. “You've barged into my house and tried to bribe me with gems, asking me to betray one of my guests to you... a guest who you have named after a pony who was not only a good friend of mine, but the bearer of the Element of Loyalty?”

“uh... yes?” The Enclave mare didn't seem to like where this was going. I, on the other hoof, felt a sense of relief. I permitted myself to crack a smile.

Spike reached forward with one claw and dropped it onto her back, pinning her against the floor. He leaned very, very close to the mare, then used another claw to lift up her visor so that they were staring at each other eye-to-eye.

Spike snorted a gout of flame into the magical armor through the open visor, setting the Enclave mare on fire inside her enclosed suit. She screamed and thrashed for an unbearably long second or two before perishing. Smoke curled out of seams in the insectoid metal carapace.

I heard Calamity bite back a strangled sound as I gagged from the smell. I didn't think I'd be eating cooked meat for a long time.

“oh Goddesses...” moaned Velvet Remedy.

Spike raised his claw again. The other Enclave pegasi fled into the night.

“Well. This is going to be trouble.”



“We should stay. We should help.”

“Ah ain't exactly gung-ho t' start shootin' at folk who could be muh kin. But Ah'll do what it takes t' make this right.”

Spike shook his head. “No. It will be better if none of you are here when they return. Once they see that their prize is gone, they will have less reason to press the matter.”

I looked at Spike worriedly. “What if they... look deeper?”

“I won’t give them that option.”

SteelHooves, now standing in the mouth of the cave, suggested, “If there’s something here you don’t want them looking at, then we’d best make sure the pegasi *know* we are somewhere else.” He turned to Calamity. “We should stay above the clouds for a bit.”

Calamity nodded. “Get ourselves seen somewhere that ain’t here.” He looked to me, “Whatcha say? Head back towards New Appleloosa, drop down an’ make a turn towards Junction R-7 after we’ve been spotted?”

“It would give us a chance to lighten our load,” Velvet Remedy added approvingly. “Get Calamity’s workbench set up.”

I nodded. It was agreed. We would draw the pegasi’s attention away from Spike’s cave. I just hoped they didn’t start shooting at us. Although if we did go up in an explosive blaze of glory, it might very well be worth it to keep the *Gardens of Equestria* safe.

“Before we go,” Velvet Remedy said to Spike, “I did have one question you might be able to answer.” My heart skipped a beat. Please, I begged silently, don’t let it be about Fluttershy!

“Sure,” Spike said amiably.

“What are those towers?” Velvet asked, much to my relief. “The tall, slender white ones? As we were flying here, I saw several of them. They’re the only things I’ve seen as tall as this mountain, and they’re definitely pony-made.”

“They were for the Single Pony Project,” Spike answered, speaking simultaneously with Calamity.

“Them’s the Sustainable Pegasi Project,” Calamity had stated. Spike and Calamity looked at each other.

Okie, dokey, lokey. “The Single Pony Project?” I asked. Calamity looked a touch hurt that I didn’t turn to his expertise first. “You’ve mentioned that before. What was the project for?”

Spike opened his mouth, then paused. The dragon raised a claw, then stopped. Finally, he admitted, “I actually have no idea. I spent all my time with Twilight. I don’t really know much about what the other Ministries were up to. All I know is that it was called the Single Pony Project, that it was Rainbow Dash’s idea, and that it was pretty much the only thing the Ministry of Awesome did.”

“Only *official* thing,” SteelHooves interjected.

I turned to Calamity now, “Sustainable Pegasi Project?”

“Well, Ah can’t say fer sure it weren’t the Single Pony Project at some point...” Calamity chewed on what the dragon had said. “Ah was told otherwise, but it ain’t like Ah ain’t got no reason t’ doubt anythin’ just cuz the Great Pegasus Enclave declares it t’ be true.”

Velvet Remedy looked particularly pained at this spectacular mangling of proper grammar.

“An’ iff’n it were Rainbow Dash who come up with it, then Ah really doubt she woulda meant fer those towers t’ be bein’ used fer what they all are usin’ them fer now. Cuz right now, they’re being used t’ help keep the pegasus ponies isolated from the rest of y’all.”

“How so?”

Calamity turned to Velvet Remedy. “Remember when ya asked about what we ate up here, an’ Ah joked ‘bout cloud seedin’?”

Velvet Remedy nodded. “I recall that I was going to demand a proper answer later.”

“Yeah, well, now yer gonna get it,” Calamity said. “I dunno what them towers were originally meant t’ do. But Ah know what the Enclave has repurposed ‘em t’ do. And that’s t’ enchant the clouds fer miles around ‘em so that we c’n grow crops right up in the sky.”

I let out a whistle at that. From somewhere outside, Pyrelight whistled back.

Made sense. No matter what the Single Pony Project had been meant to be, the towers were now being used to suit the purposes of the surviving ponies. The pegasus ponies were using them up above for agriculture up above. Homage was using them below to broadcast DJ Pon3's music and messages across the Equestrian Wasteland. (*"Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts!"*) And Red Eye was using one for the Goddesses-knew-what.

My thoughts drifted to Homage.

I hadn't told Homage about SteelHooves' deception. He'd used DJ Pon3's radio broadcast to spread his lie about Chief Grim Star. (I had to wonder how somepony like SteelHooves managed to find himself in a romantic relationship with the mare of the Element of Honesty.) I expected that Homage would be personally offended. I didn't want to be the bearer of a message that caused her pain. But I didn't keep my mouth shut *just* because I didn't want to upset her.

She might feel provoked to air what I told her, even though I could offer no evidence to back it up. Yet what good would that serve?

More likely, I suspected she would choose not to air it. Like my struggles with addiction, or her real identity, sometimes secrets had their place. Homage understood that. That wonderful unicorn had more personal integrity than any pony I'd ever met, and I couldn't bear to put her in a morally uncomfortable position. Especially not after Monterey Jack.

I was brought out of my reverie by the jab of Velvet Remedy's hoof. "Still with us, Littlepip?"

I nodded. The others were already gathering back at the *Sky Bandit*. It was time to go. We wanted to be moving before the Pegasus Enclave returned.

I trotted to the mouth of the cave and then looked back towards Spike. "I guess... this is it then?" Watcher had helped me; without

him I might not have survived. He helped give me purpose, a goal... and ultimately friendship. But now it was clear that we were not the ponies he was looking for. And he needed to focus his attention elsewhere.

Spike nodded. "I'll keep an eye open for you. We may talk again. But... yes, this is it."

"Thank you, Spike."

"Thank you, Littlepip."

I turned, and walked out of the cave.

I was about to step into the Sky Bandit when I was hit by an epiphany. Turning, I galloped back into the cave.

Honesty. It was about more than just telling the truth. It was about integrity.

"Spike!" I cried out. "I know one of the other ponies you're looking for!"



Two black-carapaced pegasi were still hot on our tails as we broke beneath the cloud-curtain.

"Ha!" shouted Calamity, wings flapping hard as he hauled the Sky Bandit through the air at breakneck speed. "Told ya they wouldn't follow us below the clouds! Cowards!"

Velvet Remedy looked at the two demonic silhouettes behind us, her hair whipping across her face. "They're still following us!"

"What?!" Calamity glanced back over his shoulder. "Oh horseapples!" Somehow, he managed to pour on even more speed.

We were pulling ahead. I saw the gemstones of the Enclave battle saddles flare, and bolts of colored light shot past us. Thankfully, neither of these pegasi had Calamity's aim.

"Calamity, could you please kindly lose these ponies?" Velvet asked with an almost seductive smoothness. "I'd really hate to get blown up today."

Two more blasts of magical energy shot past us, one actually passing through one shattered window of the passenger wagon and out another, barely missing Pyrelight. The magical bird squawked and hid behind Velvet, who cooed at her comfortingly.

"Wow," SteelHooves commented dryly. "They really don't like you, do they."

"Y'all c'n shut it now," Calamity barked back at us. "An' hold on!"

I wrapped my forelegs around one of the poles between the wagon's bench seats. Velvet Remedy clamped down on one of the bits that dangled from the ceiling. (From her expression, she immediately regretted it. I could only imagine the taste!) SteelHooves braced himself between benches. A moment later, Calamity took the *Sky Bandit* into a steep dive. Pyrelight bounced off the wagon's ceiling. She scrambled to bite down on Velvet Remedy's wind-thrashed mane before the wind threw her out the back window of the wagon. Bolts of colored light shot all around us. I think I screamed.

The Enclave pegasi broke off their pursuit about halfway to the ground.



My legs were still shaking, my hooves thankful to be planted on firm ground.

I watched as Velvet Remedy bartered with Ditzzy Doo outside the front gate of New Appleloosa, trading for spark batteries to replace the nearly drained ones in the *Sky Bandit*. We weren't allowed further, but the ghoulish pesagus was more than happy to come out and greet us. For a moment, I didn't recognize the little lavender filly who shyly followed behind her. My eyes widened as I realized it was Silver Bell. No longer painted pink.

She seemed... better. Being with Ditzzy Doo was good for her.

Silver Bell looked up, recognizing Velvet Remedy. She froze in her tracks.

"Hello, Silver Bell," Velvet Remedy said gently. "You're looking beautiful this morning."

Silver Bell looked everywhere but at Velvet.

"I have someone you might like to meet," Velvet continued, her voice warm and accepting. "Pyrelight, come out and meet Silver Bell."

The little filly's eyes went wide at the sight of the majestic balefire phoenix. The emerald and gold creature landed next to her and cooed a friendly hello. The effect on Silver Bell was dramatic -- it was as if Pyrelight was the first truly beautiful thing the girl had ever seen!

Calamity walked up next to me. "Call me crazy, but after we go, Ah half expect that filly t' spend the next few days tryin' t' make New Appleloosa as pretty as that bird."

I could so picture that.

I looked up at Calamity. The rust-colored pegasus with the orange mane and black desperado hat was probably the closest friend I had. (Not counting Homage, who was all manner of closer, but much more than a friend.)

"Ah know what yer thinkin'," Calamity stated. "Don'tcha believe 'em. The Enclave has a vested interest in makin' anypony who bucks their ideals into a monster."

"I believe you," I told him sincerely. I regularly put my life, and the lives of those I loved, in Calamity's care. I absolutely trusted him with this too. "But, Calamity, if you're running from something, perhaps we can help."

Calamity laughed. "Li'lpip, ya should know me well 'nuff by now t' know runnin' away from things ain't my way."

My friend turned his head towards the ever-present cloud cover. "Ah flew *towards* somethin'. They jus' didn't wanna let me go."



"Nice place you got here," SteelHooves said as he looked around Junction R-7. I couldn't be sure if he was being sarcastic or speaking truthfully.

"Home sweet train-wreck."

SteelHooves eyed the turret defenses, then looked up at the tri-barreled magical energy cannon mounted on the roof of the train's incongruous engine. "Oh, now that is a beauty!"

I could hear Calamity setting up his workshop. I looked around, but could not see where Velvet Remedy had wandered off to. Hopefully, she was getting some sleep. I knew I needed some. Our next stop was going to be Fillydelphia. I didn't know if we would actually find Red Eye there, but everything I had learned said that all his slave operations were centered in that foul place.

It was time to start putting some things right.

Spike's words rang in my head. *I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi.* I had sworn I would remember, as he called it, the real heart of Twilight Sparkle. I couldn't imagine forgetting, now that I had seen it for myself. The sight of that Crusader maneframe, surrounded by the Elements of Harmony, sitting and waiting... year after year, decade after decade for the chosen ponies to put right things that were far beyond my ability to effect...

I would say "collecting dust", but they hadn't been dusty. Spike, I realized, had been dutifully tending to the Elements of Harmony and the maneframe.

How hard would it be to remember if I had nothing like that sight to cling to?

Right now, I had another private moment with SteelHooves. I should make the best of it. I wanted to ask him about Applejack... but I

didn't think we were ready for that conversation yet; I felt I would be prying into someplace I hadn't yet earned the right to go.

But I had other friends, including one I worried was heading towards a shattering reality-crash. I had no idea what to do for her, but I felt that knowing as much as I could beforehand would give me my best chance to at least help her recover if I couldn't protect her from the tragic discovery.

"SteelHooves... what happened to Fluttershy?"

The Steel Ranger stopped in mid-trot and turned his visor towards me. "Depends on who you ask," he answered cryptically.

"Nopony knows?" I asked, having really hoped for a more definitive answer than that. Preferably one that I could mine for a little hope.

SteelHooves shook his head. "Keep in mind, it's really hard to pin down what happened to any particular pony. Skeletons don't come with nametags. And there were millions of ponies for whom the megaspells didn't even leave that. Some places, like Splendid Valley and the Canterlot Ruins, are still far too dangerous for proper expeditions. It's rare that you can say for certain what happened, even to a loved one."

Oh dear. I nodded slowly.

"That said, most ponies... well, those who ever think of or even know about Fluttershy beyond the Ministry of Peace posters... believe that she was so devastated by what had happened to Equestria and to the world because of her efforts to force peace that she plodded into one of the really bad places and let nature tear her apart. Let Equestria do to her what she had done to it."

I cringed. This wasn't what I had hoped for.

"There are other tales. Some claimed she leapt to her death from the top of the Ministry of Peace in the Canterlot Ruins."

"Wasn't she a pegasus?"

SteelHooves nickered. "Yes. But then, just being *outside* in Canterlot would have been death sentence enough." I looked at the ground. It just kept getting worse. "And then there are the ponies who say she wandered into the Everfree Forest and became a tree."

"Wait. *What!?*" I demanded, jaw on the ground. "How could that even happen?!"

SteelHooves gave a shrug. "Don't ask me. I've always been in the Fluttershy-committed-suicide camp, myself." He snorted. "Still, Everfree is a bizarre and twisted place. It became vastly more warped and deadly after the apocalypse... although Luna knows why. It wasn't even hit."

The Steel Ranger turned away. "Only thing everypony can agree on: Fluttershy lived through the Apocalypse... long enough, at least, for the full horror of it all -- the death of innumerable ponies and animals, the poisoning and disfiguring of the land itself -- to be ground into her soul."

I collapsed onto my haunches, feeling heartsick.

"This is the Equestrian Wasteland. It's nothing if not cruel."



"Well, this was a bust.

"Spike's asleep. I could wake him, but why would I do that to the poor guy. To wake up to all of this? Better to let him sleep. Have good dreams for just a while longer.

"Hey, dragons can sleep for up to a hundred years, right? Maybe Spike will get lucky and not wake up until Equestria's had time to heal. Although I don't know if a hundred years will be enough..."

"Seeing the sun like this, I can almost believe it never happened. Clouds hide the view below. I'm beginning to think that's the idea.

"They call me a traitor now. Me! After all I did for them! They turn their backs on Equestria and they have the nerve to call ME a traitor!

"They've even hired a mercenary now to hunt me down. Bring them back my head. Neck need not be attached, of course.

"She's good. The best. I'm better. And she knows it..."

A second voice sounded on the audio recording, gruffer than the mare's,

"Sure. Which leaves a gal to wonder why you're just sitting up here letting me find you."

"Hello, Gilda," the mare's voice replied, sounding tired.

"Sorry it had to end this way, Dash."

"No you're not. Not really."

"Naw. Not really."

"..."

"Gilda... can I make one request?"

"What?"

"Can we sing it? One more time?"

"Huh? Sing what...? oh you can't be serious."

"Just once?"

The second voice let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Ugh. Why?"

"Because, just for a moment, I want to remember an earlier, happier time. A time when the world didn't suck."

"Fine. ...Only for you, Dash." The voice paused. "One final time. But after that, you know I'm going to kill you."

"You'll try."

The two voices blended into an odd harmony:

"Junior Speedsters are our lives. Sky-bound soars and dare..."

The audio recording abruptly cut off; the machine had reached its limit.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: The Magic of Friendship When your HP or the HP of any member of your party drops below 30%, all members of your party (including yourself) gain much greater resistance to damage.

WARNING!

The following chapter contains sexual content not suitable for all readers. Reader discretion is advised.

This chapter takes place in the middle of Chapter 20, and is considered canon by Kkat. Its content is superlative to the plot and is not required to understand the main story.

WRITTEN BY PACCE

CHAPTER TWENTY AND A HALF



A MARE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

“I’d NEVER felt joy like that before! It just felt so good I wanted to keep smiling forever!”

I stretched out on Homage’s bed as she gave me a massage. Either she had learned a lot from our visit to the spa, or she’d had practice. Either way, it was wonderful! If I was a cat, I would have been purring.

I felt her press against me as she leaned close to whisper in my ear. “I know you’re under doctor’s orders to relax and not exert yourself. You listen about as well as most of his patients.”

I nodded, not wanting to really talk about that. Or really about anything. What she was doing with her hooves was divine. She was pressing them in circles against the back of my legs at the base of my rump. Not as skilled as the professional spa ponies, maybe. But unspeakably more delightful because it was Homage doing it.

“So I won’t apologize for helping you break them further.” I had no idea what she was... oh HELLO! I gasped as I felt her tongue

someplace I had only imagined it before. Pleasure burst through my whole body.

And she was just getting started. This was definitely going to qualify as *strenuous activity*.

After the second pass of her tongue, I became vibrant. I was grinning like a fool. *This is really happening. We're really going to do this!*

Then another thought struck me at the third lick. *Oh Goddesses, we're really doing this. What if I'm lousy? What if she hates me forever? What if she gets on the radio in the morning and tells all of the Wasteland that the Stable Dweller is the worst lay ever?*

My ecstatic joy replaced with panic, I started shaking all over. When I felt her tongue stop touching, I fought the urge to scream for her to continue, terrified that the spell would break and she'd realize she could be with a much taller and more attractive mare.

"Littlepip, you okay?" her voice was filled with concern. Probably worried that I was suffering some kind of withdrawal symptom or post traumatic stress from one of the many times I had nearly died lately.

"I'm fine," I lied. Just this once.

"Am I... going too fast for you?"

"No!" I cried, my voice straining not to crack. That wasn't a lie. She could have pounced me when I first laid eyes on her and I'd say she was still too slow.

"Good," she said with a laugh. "Because I had *no* intention of stopping."

Then she was back to work. Her tongue was hot as it circled me back there. Do tongues naturally get that hot when near another pony's private parts, or was *I* just hot there and she just providing pressure? I stopped wondering much of anything when it slipped inside.

I cried out. I'm pretty sure I wasn't speaking any known language. Somehow the entire universe had collapsed between my

haunches and the only thing left was that hot slippery bit of mare boldly going where no mare had gone before.

Somewhere, a part of me was mortified. Whenever I had been turned on in the past, I had been thinking about or looking at some pony that I didn't have a chance with. My natural instinct had always been to put my back to a wall, but now there was nowhere to hide. She was seeing exactly what I felt, she was *inside* me. It was too much. My hooves were digging at the bed spread, I wanted to run. I knew that any moment she'd realize this was all a huge misunderstanding, she'd throw me out, and I'd have to try to make up some pony so I could finish on my own.

Finish? The pressure was building already. Oh Goddesses, no. Sweet Celestia and Luna. *I've already been blown up recently, have some mercy!* It turned out they were busy. I exploded. My body went into spasms and I burst out crying.

"Whoa," Homage pulled her head back licking, well, *me* off her lips. "And here I was worried that I'd gotten rusty. Am I just that good or are you that sensitive?" I could hear the amusement in her voice.

"I'm sorry," I wanted to slink out the room before she started laughing at poor Pip who couldn't last for more than a minute.

I felt her lips on my neck. "Why are you sorry?" her voice was soft. Her mane brushed against me and, I swear, I almost popped again. "It's been a while for me too."

"It's been my whole life." *Oh shit, I did not just say that!* I threw both forelegs over my mouth, trying to shove the words back in.

I braced for harsh, mocking laughter. Instead I felt teeth at my ear. "Your first time, and like this?" Was she *moaning*? "I can't say I'm not jealous."

"Well it's not like it's my first, I've had a lot of time alone and--" I had to shove a hoof *in* my mouth this time. *Sweet sky-fucking Celestia, was there anything else I could say to embarrass myself?* A very indignant voice

shrieked in my head. *Maybe I want to tell her about how I wet the bed as a filly?*

"I meant with another pony." She was sucking on the end of my ear. As it turns out, that feels better than just about anything except what she was doing between my legs with her hooves. "Just one thing. You're not *done*, right?"

Oh Goddesses, was she kidding? Just listening to her voice and that feeling on my ear was enough to... *Oh, here we go again.* Another shock of ecstasy burst through my entire body. She pressed her body against mine and seemed to ride my spasms and bit down on my ear. Hard.

"Well, that answers that," she said after my body had quieted. I felt a telekinetic field wrap around me and flip me on my back. "That's good, because I have *so* much more to do," I had never see anypony look at me like that before. I blinked and she had disappeared between my legs. Her lips were as able as her tongue, but the hint of teeth made it that much more-

"So I have a question," she said quickly after her lips had brought about the destruction of any thought in my head.

"Now?" I managed to squeak.

Looking up at me, she pressed her chin firmly against my ever dampening crotch. "No time like the present. And I want to know more about you. Understandable, given the situation. Right?"

I was struggling to remember some the more sophisticated words, like "what" when she nipped at my inner thigh. "Ask!"

"That Velvet is *quite* the looker."

You've got to be fucking kidding.

"When you first left the Stable, I'd heard it was to look for her. So is there anything there?" She followed by pressing the tip of her nose into me.

“That’s- **AH!** That’s- *It’s **REALLY** hard to focus when you’re doing that!*”

“Do you want me to stop?” Her mouth was right over me, her breath puffing into me. “Do you need to figure out how to answer the question?” She opened her mouth and let that wonderful, amazing tongue dangle, idly tracing my slit.

“It’s just, this is a bit of an ambush,” I said as quick as I could before having to bite into my wrist to keep from screaming.

She finally sat up, allowing me to relax. Then she brought up the tip of her forehoof. “Let me back up, regardless of what you say, we’re *still* doing this.” To bring home the point, she pressed harder. “From the way she practically threw me at you and what you’ve already told me, I know there’s at least nothing *actively* going on. But you don’t go chasing across half the Wasteland for just anypony.”

“I had a major crush on her all my life.” No point in trying to play it cool. “But she was just a face, a voice on the radio. Something to fill my fantasies with.” I hadn’t really put my thoughts in order since she’d shot me, but this all rang true, even if it was all coming out under *duress*. “I really didn’t know her until I met her out here in the Wastes.”

“Oh?” She laid her head on my belly.

“The fantasy was nothing like the real thing.” I sighed, I’d miss those fantasies. They were my oldest companions. “She’s... special. But she’s *not* the mare I rushed out to rescue. That mare was just pretend, a voice on the radio.” Saying that hurt. It was like a goodbye to a part of myself.

She just looked at me for a long time. Then she cocked an eyebrow, “A voice on the radio, huh?”

I groaned. “Oh, don’t even start. I thought you were a stallion.”

She had gone back to kissing, “Well, you know better now.”

"And while we're talking about stallions, Calamity's just a friend too! And I met SteelHooves just before you!" I really didn't want to have think about either of them between orgasms.

She looked up at me with a pout. "Oh, sweetie, I know you only have eyes for mares. Every account I got about you made mention of you eyeing up some filly or another."

I didn't have long to be embarrassed before her tongue sent another damn wave through me. After crying in tongues I briefly wondered if it counts as one if I come twice in a row.

"I am *loving* playing with you."

I noticed.

"One more question and I'll let you be."

"Fine," I managed to say after remembering my name.

She hopped, pressing her knees into my chest and putting her forehooves under her chin. "So what's a mare like you see in a mare like me?"

She was actually going to let me think about this one, of course.

"If you're getting tired and need something to eat, help yourself." She floated a fruit bowl over to the bedside table.

I realized how ravenously hungry I was, I took an apple from the bowl and devoured it. Licking my lips clean, I looked down at her, patiently waiting on my chest. I rolled my eyes up in mock contemplation for several seconds. "Is 'I was really really horny' a good enough answer?"

She burst out laughing, it was a wonderful sound. "What, none of the pretty Raider mares give you a second look?"

"Well, there were more than a few that showed an interest in *penetrating* me, but I was holding out for a gal who'd buy me dinner first." I munched on another apple to drive home my point. "Actually, I always really respected DJ Pon3. Somepony out here dedicated to

helping everypony they possibly can? It was a constant reminder that not everypony had become Raiders in the Wastes."

Homage kissed my chest and smiled up at me, "I'd think you'd just need to look in the mirror for that."

It turns out, I could still blush. "Yeah, but you were helping everypony without..." I paused, a memory surfacing; I felt blood on my horn and saw a mare on the ground whispering that she didn't want to die. I swallowed a bit of apple in my mouth. "You don't kill anypony. You just help. That meant a lot to me." I saw the understanding on her face. I quickly moved on before she could ask if I wanted to talk about it. I didn't. "Of course, when I found out you were actually a gorgeous mare with a rump that just wouldn't quit, I was head-over-heels. I mean who wouldn't be?"

I felt her slide off my chest, and I took another hearty bite from my third apple. That's when I felt her lips wrap around my clit. It was about a minute before I realized I couldn't breathe and not in the "*ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh*" way but in a "there's a large piece of apple in my windpipe" way. After a few sputters and coughs, she took notice of my peril and, I guess she didn't want to be known as "the mare who killed the Stable Dweller with oral sex" because she sprang into action to help me cough up the lethal snack.

"Warn me before you do that," I hoarsely shouted after the offending chunk of apple fell to the bed.

"I'm sorry," she said giving me a nuzzle on the cheek. "But you called me your hero and then said I had a pretty butt. I couldn't resist." She floated a carrot from the nearby bowl and into her mouth, but rather than eat it, she held it out for me. I reached forward and bit into it, thinking she'd let go, instead she held fast and gave me a flirty look. She waited patiently as I chewed the carrot down until I reached her lips, only then did she swallow what was left in her mouth and I'm pretty sure she only did that to free up her tongue.

After a few minutes of that, I leaned back on the bed and patted my stomach with a contented sigh. "Man, those really hit the spot. So much more flavor than Stable food."

Homage coozied up next to me, pressing her face against my neck. "Do you miss it? The Stables, I mean."

The question caught me by surprise. Not so much because of the question itself, it was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, but because the answer was, "No."

"Really?" She sounded shocked.

"I mean, I miss not being shot all the time," I added quickly. "And I miss having a comfy place to sleep consistently. But, I never really felt alive in there. It was like we were just waiting to die. I don't think ponies were meant to be cooped up all their lives." She made a noise in understanding and ran a hoof down my side. I kissed the top of her head, smelling her mane. "Also, I've met some really nice ponies since I got out."

"You know," a smile played across my lips as I spoke, "I think that fruit has given me my second wind. You want to continue where you left off?"

She rolled off me and pulled her back legs under her to sit on her haunches. She looked at me like I was foal who made a social faux pas. "Um, Pip, I just watched you have five orgasms, and I don't know what they taught you in the Stables," she leaned back and spread her back legs, "but in the bedroom, you gotta share."

Part of me was embarrassed that I hadn't done anything for her tonight, but that wasn't the part of me that was staring in stunned paralysis at her crotch. Outside of health class, I had never seen another mare like this. It was fascinating. It was exciting. It was giving me another orgasm. *For Goddesses' sake she wasn't even touching me!*

She just watched me shudder and gasp for a minute. "You weren't kidding about the 'being really horny' thing, were you?"

"A few days ago I caught myself ogling a one-eyed griffon," I said after catching my breath.

"Well, at least I know you're open minded," she said with a smirk. She reclined there staring at me, "Hey Pip, are you gonna, you know, *do* something soon?"

Oh. Right. I rolled over to my belly bringing myself at eye level with her lap. I thought about all the things she had done with tongue and lips. I rolled my own tongue around in my mouth. It felt sluggish and clumsy. "Hey, um, do you have a book or something I could read with a few tips or hints or..." She closed her legs. I swear, I'd never been closer to heartbreak.

She took a deep breath and let it out in a quick sigh. "It's alright, next time I'll give you a full tutorial." She got off the bed; I wanted to cry. Then she started rummaging under the bed. "Until then, I just happen to have something we can do that'll work for both of us." She came back into view floating a narrow rectangular box. She popped the lid off. The inside was lined with tissue paper. "It's a bit of pre-war technology I found in my more traveled days. It's a device designed to allow two ponies to share their pleasure." Her horn lit up, and I saw the tissue being pushed aside. "Don't worry, it's been very thoroughly tested for safety." She floated the object out of the box with a look of pride on her face.

"It's two dicks stuck together end on end," I observed flatly.

"Isn't it though," she had the same look on her face that I'd seen Calamity wear after cleaning his guns. She finally pulled her eyes from it and looked to me, I had apparently failed to hide my horror. "Don't worry, it's not real." She gave it a poke and it wobbled in the air; I was suddenly nauseous.

"Homage," I said, staring at the floating phallus. "Remember when I said I like *mares*? That's... um... really really not a mare."

"It's just a *toy* Pip," she said patiently. She gave me a sideways look. "Do you mean that you've never seen anything like this

before? Even back in the Stable?" I shook my head. "So what did you do for stress relief?"

"I got to know my hooves pretty well," I mumbled.

Homage opened her mouth looking like she had more to argue, but then just let it close. She let out a single laugh and said, "Oh well, don't worry about it."

I couldn't help but feel a little rotten. She had looked so happy at the chance to use her toy with another pony, and she'd already done so much for... and *to* me. I reached out a hoof to stop her from putting the box top back on. "Wait, you're right. I mean, it's just a toy and... I think I can be okay with it if it's you." I realized as I said it, that I meant it. We hadn't known each other long, but she already meant a lot to me and I was willing to try and make her happy.

She smiled warmly and kissed me on the nose. "I *so* have you wrapped around my hoof." She giggled and started rummaging in the bedside table drawer. "I think this a new record for me when it comes to relationships. You can basically orgasm on command and damn if you don't make the best faces when you do. Now I just need to teach you how to return the favor and you'll be perfect."

I knew from that instant that she would forever wear the dress here. I had officially become the passive one in the relationship, and I really wasn't sure I was... Wait, *relationship*? This was a relationship. I, Littlepip, short for Pipsqueak, had an honest to Goddesses relationship. I was grinning like it was my birthday and Homage had just popped out of the cake. I had a relationship. She could shove whatever she wanted in me because *I had a relationship!*

After I came back down off my cloud, I noticed she was looking at me intensely and had in fact been talking the whole time. "I *said* I'm going to need to use this," she floated a tube in front of me. "It'll be cold, but since you've never used anything like this before, this is *going* to hurt some."

Psh. I've been shot, stabbed, smacked around, and nearly cooked by a dragon. I was ready for anything. I rolled over to my belly and raised

“What do you mean turn it o-” There was clicking sound. “OoOoOoOoOoH sweet Celestia horn fucking Luna in the ass!” *It vibrates; how novel.*

I fleshed out my two new languages with a shiny series of swears, all having to do with the female organs. I think sometime less than a thousand years passed, but I really wasn't the best to judge since I was dead for at least part of the time. The only thing I can say for sure was that we were going to need to change the sheets and pillowcases and that she made the silliest and most gorgeous face when she came. She looked like she was sneezing, laughing, and had a pinched nerve in her neck all the same time. Needless to say, I came with her.

She turned it off, and I would have collapsed if it wasn't still holding us together. She carefully slid it out of me and then herself. She gave it an affectionate kiss, on my end I noted with some small perverted pride, and then set it back in its box. She stuck her tongue out at me and asked, “So what did you think of my toy?”

I tentatively touched my aching nethers. “It does its job,” I grunted.

She nodded and gave a whistle, “I noticed.”

I rolled onto my back, trying to move my legs as little as possible. “But to be perfectly honest, I liked it more when it was just you and me. That felt more like I was just masturbating while you watched. It was just... too artificial.”

She put the lid back on the box and slid it under the bed. “Fair enough,” she sighed. “Thank you for letting me *really* try it out, and I promise I won't bring it out on you again.” She crawled over and kissed me on the cheek. “Except on my birthday.”

I sighed and floated a peach from the bowl and munched on it quietly for a few minutes. Eating helped calm me down and brought me back from exhaustion. A thought hit me as I recovered.

“So, time for *your* interview Ms. Pon3,” I said, trying to sound cool with arguable success.

“Turnabout is fair play,” she said rubbing her face against my neck.

“So what’s a well respected DJ’s assistant doing with a toaster repair gal like me?” I asked, half laughing at her joke.

She didn’t laugh. She sat up and turned to face me. All expression had fled from her face. “Do you really want to know?”

“Well, yeah, I asked didn’t I.” I was getting nervous; maybe I *didn’t* want to know if this was the effect asking had.

“It’s because you’re a hero.” She said it without any trace of mockery.

I’d have blushed if my face wasn’t still flush from our multi-orgasmic good time. “Not this again-”

“Let me finish,” she snapped. “You asked and now you have to listen to the answer, no matter how bad it hurts.”

I was getting scared.

“I’ve seen all kinds of things as DJ Pon3 and even before that when I was out in the Wastes. I’d seen horrors, as I’m sure you’ve seen.”

I only nodded, thinking of skinned and splayed open corpses used as decoration and the image of Calamity shooting that young foal Raider from the other day popped in my head.

“But I’ve seen and heard about heroes too.” She sounded wistful as she continued. “Ponies who set out to help others and fight against anything that threatened their fellow pony. I loved them. I lived to see and hear about them. They gave me just a little hope that maybe we weren’t damned after all. That there might be a light at the end of this fucking tunnel we buried ourselves in.”

I was about to speak my agreement when she went on.

“And then I’d see their heads on spikes outside a Raider camp.” She looked at me hard. “You’re a hero Littlepip, and that means you’re going to die very soon because you’re a blight on the Wasteland. They’ll kill you because ‘what’s right’ doesn’t fit in this world any more, and *I’m* going to have to report it after.”

I got up and backed out of bed. I had thought about dying before, knew it was something that could happen so easily to me out here. But to be told it was a fucking certainty...

She wasn't done. "Or you'll give up. I've seen that too. Heroes who helped folks only for them to be slaughtered by some other threat or worse, for those they saved to go to do atrocities themselves in the name of survival. They just hang up their guns and go find some shit-hole to drink themselves to death in."

I fell back on my haunches.

"You're a good pony, Littlepip. An honest to fucking goodness hero. And I wanted to know you, to hold you, to love you before you're gone too."

Something broke inside me. No. Not something. My heart. My heart broke. I'd searched and fought and killed and nearly died in the name of what I believed to be "right". I'd found somepony who did the same, and she just told me that none of it would actually matter in the end.

I saw the Wasteland, not as a place, but as a giant razor clawed beast devouring ponies by the dozens. I saw myself attack it valiantly only to be smashed without it even looking. I saw a line of "me"s, each one attacking and dying without ever even slowing the monster's grizzly feast.

I saw New Appleoosa burning, the townsponties all dead or being lead away in chains along with all the slaves I had fought so hard to free. I saw the Talon mercs laughing as they threw Monterey Jack's foals down from the sky. I saw Gawd with her small army attacking a convoy for supplies and leaving no survivors.

I saw myself coming upon Silver Bell, so broken that she didn't even have herself left anymore, in front of the graves of her family. She ran up to me and pressed against my chest, crying and asking me to tell her it would be okay. I saw myself bring out Little Macintosh and press it against her head. I said it would be okay, and then I pulled the trigger.

I wanted to scream, but I knew I'd just throw up if I opened my mouth. I fell, my forelegs unable to hold me up anymore.

I needed something. Anything to believe in. I tried to think of Celestia and Luna, but they were just shadows in my mind now.

I thought of Silver Bell again, but I thought of what had really happened. I saw Velvet bring her to Ditzy Doo. Ditzy Doo. My mind locked on to her.

I tried to imagine Ditzy before the war. I couldn't keep a straight idea of what color her coat was, but I knew from the errant strands still clinging to her that her mane was straw colored. In my mind she was beautiful back then; she had to be. She was flying by, and everypony smiled up at her. With a vague imaginary voice that sounded like a fading echo, she apologized for not having any deliveries for them today.

Ditzy turned and looked out at Cloudsdale in the distance. It exploded. I saw the fire overtake her, and I saw her burning, and she leapt out to try to protect the nearest pony, but they were gone. I saw her fall to the ground as what she was now, a ghoul. I saw her wake up in the newly formed Wasteland. She walked, just looking in shock at the carcass of her world.

Then she'd have heard a noise. A foal crying. She'd have run to it. The foal would be too hurt to walk, but would have screamed and tried to run when it saw her. Ditzy smiled reassuringly, only making them scream worse. Then she'd have rolled her eyes independently of each other and the foal would have stopped crying, in confusion if nothing else. Ditzy would have thrown the foal on her back, picked a direction, and would have walked.

On the way, more crying, more screaming, all of them foals. She stopped to gather every single one. She finally came to a collection of huts. The ponies there shot Ditzy on sight. The foals gathered around her and screamed that she helped them, that she was a good pony. The ponies mended her wounds and took the foals in. Ditzy hears screams off in the distance and she leaves.

I see her much later. A Slaver's hoof is on her neck, across the room another Slaver is looming over a filly. Ditzzy screams, "Don't hurt her, she's just a foal. Please, I'll do anything, just don't hurt her! You don't *want* to do this!"

The Slaver by the filly yells at the one on Ditzzy's neck, "Shut that zombie bitch up! She's killing my hard-on."

The Slaver on Ditzzy's neck, a unicorn, takes up a knife from a nearby table. "Oh, I'll shut her up."

I see Ditzzy on the floor, gore pooling around her mouth. The two Slavers on the other side of the room, laughing, their backs to her. She pulls herself up, two of her legs are broken. She picks up a piece of piping in her mouth.

I see her taking the filly she rescued to New Appleoosa. She's helping Ditzzy to write. I see Ditzzy pouring over a large blank book, she titles it "The Wasteland Survival Guide."

I see Ditzzy making a delivery that takes her past Ponyville, she hears the screams of a filly.

I see her now, as I saw her then, a lifetime ago. She's beaten, she's caged, she's sure she'll die as soon her captors decide how. She's wrapped around a foal, trying to help them stop crying. I free her, I thought she was a monster. I see her again, unarmed, about to be killed because there was another filly in pain.

I'm back in the present, and I can't stop crying. I'm sobbing so hard my entire body hurts. Homage touches my back, and I stand up instantly. I suck back enough snot so that I can talk, and I choke out as loud as I can, "You're wrong."

I'm still shaking, but I refuse to stop. "I've seen some fucking horrors too! I've seen things so ugly that it made me wonder if that fucking war only gave us half of what we deserved for having such shit inside us. But that's wrong!" I wipe my eyes so I can see. "I've seen goodness too; I've seen a town that dealt with Slavers for their livelihood give their lives to save the ponies they partially helped enslave. I've seen a

band of Raiders turn a prison into the beginnings of a trading post, a whole new town.” My throat tightened, but I couldn’t stop now. “I’ve seen a pony who watched her entire fucking world die; she’s suffered *every fucking thing* either of us can imagine, and the only thing she cares about is helping.”

I stamped the ground. “I will not listen as you or anypony tells me that goodness is a blight. GOODNESS IS NOT A FUCKING BLIGHT!” I screamed as loud as my throat would allow. “I’ve seen things, and I know *in my heart* that we’re not beyond hope. We can be good. We *want* to be good! It’s just that in a world so badly broken, darkness has been allowed to run free for so long that they’ve convinced everypony that that’s the way it is now. Ponies just need to be shown that they don’t have to be scared all the time, and they’ll fight against the darkness again, and one day foals will *laugh* at the idea that there were once monsters in the shadows.”

I stood my ground and looked at Homage; she was frozen. “You say that they’ll either kill me or I’ll give up. Well they’re going to have to fucking kill me, because their world is a *lie* and I will *not* give up. Ever!” I breathed heavily and the tears dried up in me. Homage just stared at me as though she’d never seen me before.

I didn’t know what I expected her to do, but I certainly didn’t expect her to kiss me and lead me back to the bed. “I believe you,” was all she said.

I blinked my burning eyes. “Come again?”

“I intend to as soon as you get over here,” she said with a half smile. I just looked at her. “I believe you. I was wrong. I thought I’d seen heroes before. I thought I’d seen *everything* before.” Tears streamed down her face, she ignored them. “But I’d never seen *you* before. I believe you, Littlepip. I believe *in* you. Things *can* change, and when they do, it’ll be because you reminded us all that darkness is just a passing thing and that our true nature is *good*.”

I guess I wasn’t out of tears after all.

“Now get your adorable ass over here. I’m going to give you that tutorial I promised.”

I climbed back into bed with her. With her mouth on me and mine on her, she taught me. She went slowly so that I didn’t get too excited. After some rigorous testing, I turned out to be, well, passable anyway.

Homage lay sleeping beside me. I knew I should have joined her long ago, but I just laid there and ate the last apple from the bowl as I watched her sleep.

I felt something I’d only heard about in rumors and stories burning in my chest. Love, they always called it. I loved her. She had shown me that even a pony who thought they had seen it all could still have hope. And when there was love and hope, evil would never stand a chance. I made a mental note to give Ditzzy a big squishy hug sometime for reminding me of that.

I laughed at my own cheesy thoughts. “Goddesses, I am *so* gay.”

Bonus Perk: Way of the Fruit - You understand the way of the fruit. You enjoy strange and wonderful benefits whenever you eat... *fruit*. When you do it, you get a temporary +1 bonus to your strength. Being eaten ain’t so bad either.

